

BOOK

4

# 寻秦记

黄易

黄易精品

Huang Yi

A STEP INTO  
THE PAST



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# **A STEP INTO THE PAST**

## **BOOK 4**

### **(Volume 16 to 20)**

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# The Warring States of China c. 260 BCE





# A STEP INTO THE PAST

By: HUANGYI

## VOLUME 16

### CHAPTER 1

Empress Dowager Yanyan

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

AMONGST the palaces Xiang Shaolong has seen, the scale of the Chu palace is second only to that of the Xianyang palace, but it is the most tightly guarded.

The palace city is surrounded by thirty foot high walls with

an elaborate tower in each of the four corners. The walls are completely encircled by a fifty foot wide moat with clear waters that allow one to see the bottom. The most formidable are the wooden stakes that stick out of the middle of the moat, making it difficult for one to swim across. There are two city gates which can be raised or lowered for traffic.

Behind the high walls are layers upon layers of palace halls and rooms which are mostly either part of the outer Royal Court or the inner palace courtyard. The central enclosure is bounded by an inner wall with two bell drum-towers. An inner palace gate is set in the link-way between the outer Royal Court and the inner courtyard.

The overall layout is symmetrical about a central axis, with a main street connecting the North and South city gates and the inner palace gate. Eight large palace halls and close to sixty courtyard houses are laid out tidily around the central axis on both sides of the main street, with marble fishponds, foot bridges, running water and ancient trees reaching the sky, magnificent and handsome.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan entered the palace through the North entrance. They traversed a large square and a bridge over a transverse brook before reaching the two main palace halls 'Political Discourse' and 'Rites and Ceremonies'. Both halls were built on white stone terraces with encircling paths and railings. The atmosphere was solemn and magnificent.

Of the six other smaller palace halls, four were part of the

outer Royal Court and two were part of the inner palace courtyard. They were all named after characters from the Chu mythology. The outer Royal Court halls were named 'Fire God', 'River Goddess', 'The God of Punishment' and 'Fate'.

The inner courtyard halls were named 'Fragrant Martyr' and 'Witch'.

As he was listening to Li Yuan's introductions, the hall which left the greatest impression on Xiang Shaolong was the 'Witch' Hall. Simply going by these names, it can be seen that amongst the nations, the Chu people were the most ingenious and romantic. One could forget about such audacious and innovative names for palace halls in the other states.

At the same time, his heart was charged with electricity.

Earlier, Li Yuan had raised the issue of killing Lord Chunshen, then side-tracked to another topic, apparently to give him time to digest this hard-to-swallow proposal. He thus recalled Li Yuan's worries.

Lord Chunshen has wielded power for a long time after all, with a thousand lackeys under his wing. He has a lot of prestige in Chu, is strong in every department, and has hard stems and deep roots.

If Li Yuan kills him personally, he could incite unrest. He therefore has to find a scape goat, that man being Xiang Shaolong.

Once he reached Shouchun, he had unyieldingly chased away the Li Chuangwen who had forcibly seized the Dian King's Mansion, appearing to be completely oblivious to the consequences. In Li Yuan's eyes, he looked like a heroic and straightforward person.

If he could prompt Xiang Shaolong to assassinate Lord Chunshen, he could push all accusations onto Wan Ruiguang. In this way, he could also neutralize the Zhuang family's attempt to reclaim their country and even take Madam Zhuang for himself, killing three birds with one stone. There was no stratagem that was more malicious than this.

Those who stood on the side of Chu all wished to use Li Ling's hand to flatten the vassal state and bring it back under Chu's control<sup>1</sup>. It appears that Li Yuan, Lord Chunshen and Li Ling were like snakes and mice in the same nest, merely paying lip service to the beauty Madam Zhuang!

The horse carriage entered the inner palace gate into the inner palace courtyard. This was where the Chu King handled daily government affairs and lived his daily life. The main buildings were the two palace halls 'Fragrant Martyr' and 'Witch', and six palaces<sup>2</sup> to the East and West. Each palace was composed of four courtyard houses. There were also three gardens, the 'Imperial Garden' on the main street and the East and West Gardens on the East and West streets.

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<sup>1</sup> We need to remember that the vassal states had stopped abiding by Chu after King Xiaolie took over, and were subjects in name only.

<sup>2</sup> There is the whole complex which is called the 'Palace'. Within the Palace there are many 'palaces'. To simplify everything, we will call everything 'palace'. The context should be sufficient to distinguish the two.

The scenery was harmonious and boundless.

Li Yuan was clearly learned, explaining the folklore behind the names of the palace halls one by one. His style of conversation was elegant and filled with an enchanting charisma. It is no wonder that even though her heart belonged to him, Xiang Shaolong, and even knowing that Li Yuan was not a good guy, Madam Zhuang was unable to restrain her emotions with him.

At this point, he was talking about the River Goddess and the Witch, and with a laughing voice said: "Our two most beautiful goddesses. the River God and the Witch, do not inhabit Chu's borders, but are from Han's Luo River and Qin's Mount Wu respectively. Laughing with the lips and eyes, indistinct and abstract as spirits, inhabiting distant rivers and mountains, it is fascinating to think about."

Xiang Shaolong said: "Regarding the matter about Lord Chunshen that Imperial Uncle mentioned...."

Li Yuan patted his own brows amiably and said: "Lets discuss this again at a later date. I think Brother Wan should first spend more time to clearly recognize Lord Chunshen's true face and verify that I, Li Yuan, am not slandering a good person. Brother Wan can then make his decision. Brother Wan should nonetheless remember that this is a matter between us men. If the ladies knew about this, not only will they reveal it in their countenance, it will cause them to worry all day, doing more harm than good."

Xiang Shaolong silently praised this brilliant move, and

naturally nodded his head in agreement.

Li Yuan is trying to deceive him, he is also trying to deceive Li Yuan, tit-for-tat, both sides should not have any cause to grumble.

At this moment, the horse carriage was following the East road. The question was where was Tian Dan's location?

Li Yuan laughed and said: "I have an official residence outside the palace that is ten times the size. I prefer to stay within the palace nonetheless, and I spend the large proportion of my time here.

Xiang Shaolong mused: the real reason is that you want to be close by to control Li Yanyan.

As the guardian opened the carriage door, Xiang Shaolong collected his disparate thoughts and followed Li Yuan down.

Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong sat down within the main hall as host and guest. A pretty servant maid proffered some fragrant tea.

As Xiang Shaolong's eyes took a sweep of the place, he realized that Li Yuan was a man of taste.

In the direction of the Royal Court and the central axis is a row of eighteen doors with louver windows. The pond on the terrace was adorned with miniature pavilions and rock mountains, and was forded by a stone bridge. The courtyard was wider than five hundred paces, and planted with Camellias and Chinese Cinnamon. It was just before summer and the Camellias were in full bloom. With the smell of

cassia and tangerines floating in the air, the red and white strived with each other, creating a colorful scene of Spring.

The furniture in the hall were all made of intricately carved fragrant pear wood, with the seats were covered with brocade. All kinds of decorative ancient porcelain and engraved screens could be found everywhere. Xiang Shaolong knew that his taste was not at this level.

If not for the fact that he had obtained Ji Yanran's affections first and that they had shared all kinds of extraordinary circumstances, he might really have lost to Li Yuan in that contest for Ji Yanran.

Because the North hall faced away from the Sun and was close to the pond, it was cool and refreshing, relieving the summer heat.

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan sat calmly in the middle of the hall enjoying the fragrant tea, for a moment he felt it difficult to treat this apparently honorable, bright and talented man as an enemy.

To think that this chap was so formidable, feigning closeness as family and brothers to attack the heart of this forsaken and homeless man. Of course he couldn't 'disappoint' him.

As he was about to feign thankfulness, Li Yuan clapped his hands lightly and said in a crisp voice, "Brother Wan should take a bit of time to observe the situation, then think over my story. Ai! Li Yuan is not afraid of having deep conversations with relative strangers because of righteous indignation for my Great Chu's future, nothing else."

Following his clapping, four well proportioned beauties wearing the Chu dress and veiled caps came from a side door with dancing steps. As they arrived in front of the two men, they knelt, paid their respects and with a graceful subservient posture, sat down within arm's reach of the two men.

The veils covering their faces caused them to be even more enchanting.

Only now does Xiang Shaolong realize that without Yanran, people will have an excellent way to bribe him.

He could't help having a cold sweat wondering what would have happened if he hadn't obtained Ji Yanran. It is all thanks to the fact that Li Yuan only knows the poems and songs of Chu but does not know any aphorisms like 'absolute power corrupts absolutely' nor any 'sweet honeyed stories'.

Li Yuan said, "When we seal friendships, if its not with beautiful women then its with gold. These four women come from different lands, each having windy passions, each being one out of a thousand women, and each being virgins who have never tasted sexual intercourse. Brother can take their veils off one by one, see which is the most pleasing to the eye and take that one as my meeting gift."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in his heart 'formidable!', Li Yuan could be the most adept at psychological tactics amongst the people he had met.

With the opportunity to remove the veils of all the women and to select one, his curiosity was piqued and he felt the



high level arousal of violating other people's private areas.

Even though he had no intention of accepting the beauties, he still felt a strong impulse to unmask the women for a look.

Of course he couldn't do this.

With a sinking countenance, he said, "I appreciate Imperial Uncle's kindness, but I, Wan Ruiguang, do not care for anything other than reclaiming my country."

On hearing this, Li Yuan was not angry but was pleased instead. Laughing out loud and chasing away the four women, he said, "Don't know if Brother Wan knew that the certain Li was deliberately testing you, seeing if Brother Wan would be distracted with sex. Since it is this way, I am even more relieved."

He clapped his hands again, and the pretty maid servant brought fine wine and food. Both men took a small swallow from the small wine cups and started talking freely.

Li Yuan spoke rapidly, continuously asking after the situation in Dian, expressing great concern. Thankfully Li Yuan was even more ignorant of Dian affairs than he was, and whenever Xiang Shaolong was unable to answer, he casually fabricated some exotic custom to bamboozle Li Yuan. Li Yuan also could not find any gaps in his story. In those days when he was undergoing military training, he had gone to many parts of China. Hence he recognized their terrain and culture, and could give a passable discourse.

As they were halfway through the meal, a sentry reported that the Empress Dowager had arrived.

Xiang Shaolong had a fright and was about to retreat when Li Yuan calmly and unhurriedly instructed his men to remove the food and wine, and then led him behind a screen and said, "Brother Wan can hide here. When you hear me ask about helping you reclaim your country, you will know who is getting in the way."

Xiang Shaolong asked in a low voice, "What if I am discovered by the Empress Dowager?"

Li Yuan slapped his chest in guarantee and said, "When younger sister and I speak, there is never anyone else around. If there is any issue, I will bear all responsibility. I won't let Brother Wan suffer any grievance. But remember to just keep quiet and listen, do not look."

The last time as Dong Horse Fanatic, he had to play a vulgar hero. This time Wan Ruiguang has been seen as a brave and selfless hero by Li Yuan. Xiang Shaolong could only pretend to foolishly and blankly accept this absurd arrangement. With the jingle of girdle ornaments, the incomparably delicate and graceful woman who had mesmerized King Xiaolie arrived.

With the sound of closing doors, he heard the footsteps of the imperial guards retreating outside the door.

As Xiang Shaolong recalled Lord Longyang and Madam Zhuang's description of Li Yanyan, how could he abide by Li Yuan's instructions? He placed his eye on the screen

aperture, looking towards the center of the hall.

His one look took his breath away.

He could not believe that he would see a person whose beauty and demeanor were both comparable to Ji Yanran and Qin Qing.

To be honest, she was still half a step below Ji Yanran in terms of charm and beauty, and falls short of Qin Qing's grandeur and elegance. Nonetheless she has a whiff of that 'seep into the bones' kind of universally moving, frail and feeble look that causes all who meet her to sympathize with her. At this moment, she prettily stood at the center of the hall with a lightly crinkled brow. As long as one is a man, one will have a strong urge to rise up and embrace her in sympathetic and tender love. She is the kind of person that will cause honorable men to desire to pull her to a couch in search of happiness but not be able to bear adding to her the little more injury; the kind of woman who will overturn nations.

Madam Zhuang was right. Her refined and elegant-as-jade appearance was shrouded by an insipid wisp of indescribable sorrow, appearing as if there is nothing left in this world that can cause her to regain her happiness. Li Yanyan's head sported a cloud bun. Even her fringe was made like a cloud, placed on top of her long delicate eyebrows which reached her temples, really fitting the description 'cloud bun thick obvious fragrance dense eyebrow dye'.

The hair on her temples are loosely combed in a curvy style,

thin and translucent, and dimly discernible like cicadas' wings. This further emphasized her consummately beautiful almond-shaped face and her sorrowfully beautiful eyes.

Slim and graceful, with a delicate body in balance. Coupled with a phoenix crown and an emerald dress, this gave her a larger than life, hard to surmount, aloof and remote, immortal beauty.

She was adorned with all manner of ornaments, but the most eye catching piece was the necklace hanging from her powdered neck and sitting on her silky bosom. The upper tier was made from twenty plus jewel embedded gold beads while the lower tier held a piece of dew-drop shaped jade as the anchoring ornament, reflecting the sparkle from the jewel encrusted phoenix crown on her head, sparkling and translucent, dazzling and brilliant, but not at all diminishing her delicate and refined essence that transcended all riches and honor.

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help feeling shocked at her beauty.

If she was willing to mount the couch with him, Xiang Shaolong would be sure to do it immediately.

At this moment, Li Yuan came behind her and gently helped her remove her outer robe, exposing her gold-lined black long dress decorated with delicate phoenix motif embroidery. Her waist was bound with a jade belt, displaying a grand and magnificent attitude.

As Li Yuan's fingers touched her fragrant shoulders, this so-named Empress Dowager's delicate body shuddered visibly,

and she even lowered her gaze with a very strange expression.

Xiang Shaolong's heart jolted, thinking that the two of them are not brothers and sisters, but also realizing that if this was the case, how could they have fooled Lord Chunshen?

Even if one wanted to, it was not possible to pass oneself off as someone of Li Yanyan's nationally renown class of beauty.

As Li Yanyan's plump and smooth sexy lips trembled lightly, she said, "Why is Elder Brother here? I made an appointment with Xiu'er to come see the latest embroidery!"

With a sweet and clear voice that carried a jingling and magnetic tone, heaven has truly been kind to her.

As Xiang Shaolong has gone through these many years of setbacks and calamities, he can actually meet outstanding beauties like Madam Zhuang and Yingying and remain calm and show no interest like an old meditating monk. But this time as he is stealing a look at Li Yanyan, he knows he is about to lose his battle.

At the same time, he had a vague thought that perhaps Li Yuan wanted to obtain Ji Yanran simply because the Talented Lady Ji was the only one who could take Li Yanyan's place in his heart.

Could it be that the two brothers and sisters have an unmentionable relationship?

It was a given in this era that a husband has many wives.

When women are married to men of status and rank, some of their older and younger sisters and even nieces will follow to the groom's house as concubines, not to mention maid-servants as part of the dowry.

Even more discriminating, when a monarch marries off a daughter, lords of the same clan or even close friends will send some of their women over as gifts to be concubines.

Besides this, the aristocracy and ministers may bring any woman they fancy into the palace. It is obvious that they will have many concubines.

Families with many wives are chaotic, with fratricidal fighting and confusion over precedence happening easily.

It is very likely that Li Yuan and Li Yanyan have the same father but different mothers. A talented man matches a beautiful woman, not to mention that Li Yuan is a wolf with a savage heart, desiring to use Li Yanyan to emulate Lu Buwei's devious plot. He even caused Lord Chunshen to think that he is old but still vigorous in mind and body, giving rise to a son in his old age, then switching her to marrying King Xiaolie this other muddle-head. One can imagine how once King Xiaolie met Li Yanyan, he forgot even his father's surname and given name. How would he know that the 'miracle' in her body is actually concocted by Li Yuan? If Xiang Shaolong had not found out about the relationships between Li Yuan, Li Yanyan, Lord Chunshen and King Xiaolie from Zhao Mu, and also understood Li Yuan's unscrupulous character, he would never have been able to arrive at this

shocking deduction with just this one act between two people and their momentary expressions.

As he thought about how Li Yuan would rather have killed him than let him have the opportunity to see the two of them alone, Xiang Shaolong's breath quickened unconsciously.

As Li Yuan ushered Li Yanyan to a seat, he gently said, "Xiu'er is presently embroidering in the East wing. It is rare for us to have a chance to talk, let elder brother and Yanyan exchange a few words, ok?"

With these words, Xiang Shaolong knew that even though it appeared that Li Yuan had run into Li Yanyan by accident, it was actually arranged deliberately to allow himself to listen in on some conversation that is slanderous to Lord Chunshen, to seal himself as the tool to assassinate Lord Chunshen.

This is because Li Yuan should have known Li Yanyan would have come after lunch to see Guo Xiu'er's embroidery. This perverse and sleep depriving relationship must have been difficult to bear, that is why this most powerful person in Chu condescends to come here. It could be seen that her relationship with Guo Xiu'er is very good.

Li Yanyan sighed and said, "Speak!"

Li Yuan pretended to tremble in fear in front of this sister of his, gave a dry cough, cleared his throat and said, "I wish to discuss the matter of the Dian Princess mother and son's request for troops to help them reclaim their country."

Li Yanyan coldly said, "Elder brother must have fallen for the chaste Princess."

Li Yuan, knowing that 'Wan Ruiguang' was listening, became uneasy and unhappily said, "How can Yanyan look upon Elder Brother this way? I am but thinking on behalf of Great Chu. The late king has just passed away, if we remain unmoved by the Dian Princess mother and son's request, it could provoke the other vassal states' desire to secede. If they lean towards Qin, Chu will be in danger!"

Xiang Shaolong had a good laugh, Li Yuan was giving such a fervent speech, he is really going through a lot of trouble on his behalf.

Li Yanyan was silent for a while, and laughed dully saying, "This is not something for you or I to decide. We must consult the generals and ministers, if not there will be controversy. Has elder brother raised this with Lord Chunshen?"

Once King Xiaolie passed away, Lord Chunshen immediately became the person in the Chu court with the most decisive role in both military and civil matters. It was also because of this, that Madam Zhuang toiled to rush to Shouchun to plead for Lord Chunshen's benevolent assistance. How could she know that Lord Chunshen is the one in the background trying to eliminate the mother and son?

Li Yuan played the savior, and said in an upright and unafraid manner, "Of course I have, but Lord Chunshen is adamant and determined to use Li Ling to control the vassal state.



Madam Zhuang aside, he is also looking to eliminate the rest of her party. Ai! If Li Ling becomes dominant, do you think that he will follow the King's orders? That is why Elder Brother has to raise this issue with the Empress Dowager."

This is the first time he has addressed Li Yanyan as Empress Dowager.

The Xiang Shaolong who was peeking in rapt attention secretly exclaimed 'formidable!', no matter whether this speech is real or fake, when Li Yuan delivered it to the Chu Empress Dowager, even the false turned real. If he was the real Wan Ruiguang, he would definitely had believed without a doubt, dying with the horizontal stroke, following Li Yuan's orders to fight his fight.

Li Yanyan muttered irresolutely to herself for a while, then unhurriedly said, "I requested for Elder Brother to invite the Dian Princess mother and son to the palace for a few days. How is that coming along? If they come here, then nobody will be able to harm them. Ai! The widow and the fatherless child leads one to pity."

Xiang Shaolong was moved in his heart, and as he listened to Li Yuan explaining Madam Zhuang mother and son's reason for declining, mused that Li Yanyan's intention was actually so good. Looks like all her past actions have been forced out by the Li Clan which is headed by Li Yuan, no wonder she is so unhappy.

As he was still in perplexed thought, he heard Li Yanyan's gentle voice saying, "Elder Brother, you must go see the Dian

Princess immediately. No matter what you do you, you must get the mother and son to come into the palace together with all her people. By no means must we allow them to come to harm. Zhuang Jiao has made matchless contributions to our Great Chu. With their past loyalty, no matter what we must show them a little sympathy!"

Li Yuan secretly celebrated for having achieved his goals, and only after getting up did he realize that Li Yanyan had no intention of getting up. He was puzzled and asked, "Isn't Yanyan going to meet Xiu'er?"

Li Yanyan dully replied, "I would like to sit here alone to contemplate some issues, nobody is to disturb me."

Li Yuan couldn't help turning his head and glancing at the screen, scaring Xiang Shaolong into withdrawing his head quickly.

Li Yanyan was displeased and said, "Why is Elder Brother hesitating?"

The next sound was of the opening and closing of the doors. One could imagine how frightened and distressed the Li Yuan was as he was compelled to leave.

Xiang Shaolong was also suffering. If this beautiful woman wants to sit for half a day, he would have to be cooped up there for the same period of time. Li Yanyan's voice sounded out, "No matter who you are, come out for me immediately!"

Once Xiang Shaolong heard this, he was instantly soaked in

sweat. If he is beheaded by Li Yanyan just like that, it would certainly be most pointless.

## CHAPTER 2

## To Meet Again in a Strange Land

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

XIANG SHAOLONG stepped out from behind the screen with dragon-like movements and tiger-like steps, not the least bit afraid. He knelt and kowtowed at a distance, saying in a deep voice, "The stateless official Wan Ruiguang is guilty and deserves ten thousand deaths. May the Empress Dowager convict him."

Li Yanyan coldly looked at him and blandly said, "Raise your head!"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly pleased and raised his head

while gazing deeply into her eyes, displaying a liberal demeanor, as if completely unafraid of death.

Li Yanyan's delicate pupils emitted a keen light and solemnly said, "Now I will question and you will answer. If there is any hesitation, I will order my men to drag you outside and behead you. Do not take advantage of the fact that I am a woman. I have learned equestrian archery and sword fighting since young. There are very few people who can even think about approaching me."

Xiang Shaolong mused, no wonder you are so daring. He let out a sigh and said, "Empress Dowager might as well behead me. If it is anything concerning the Imperial Uncle, how could I speak without his permission?"

Li Yanyan was displeased and said, "Who is in charge here in my Great Chu?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he couldn't push her too far, and sadly said, "I, Wan Ruiguang, am but a stateless official. I never hoped to survive this trip to Shouchun. I would have been content to put in some effort for my country before dying."

Li Yanyan furiously said, "Do you want to die? I want to keep you alive in vain hope of death, accuse your associates of conspiring against me and bring disaster to your family and clan."

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loud and said, "It turns out that in the end you only wish to destroy our Zhuang family. Alright! I, Wan Ruiguang, will just have to accept fate."

He didn't really want to argue with her, just that the situation before him was complicated, and Li Yuan and Li Yanyan's relationship was even more unfathomable. If he surrendered obediently and betrayed Li Yuan, she would surely despise him. It would be more worthwhile to try to test the depth of her compassion for the Zhuang family.

Li Yanyan stared at him fiercely, her complexion flitting from bright to gloomy, obviously unable to decide what to make of this heroic, spirited and death defying yet talented and valiant man.

Xiang Shaolong pressed his advantage and kowtowed by knocking his head heavily three times on the floor, saying, "This is to thank Empress Dowager's compassion and desire to protect our Zhuang family just now. If Empress Dowager has changed her mind, the small official will still be very grateful. I just hope that my death will appease the Empress Dowager's anger, and hope that the Empress Dowager will be magnanimous and spare Zhuang Jiao's few remaining descendants."

As his words ended, he quickly and nimbly retreated two steps and knelt down again. He then drew his sword and played as if he was going to commit suicide.

Li Yanyan said, "Wait!"

Of course Xiang Shaolong would not force his own hand. If Li Yanyan had not shouted for him to stop, he would have had no choice but to break through the window on the back door and escape as quickly as he could to the Zhuang Mansion,

and then figure out how to escape (Chu).

As he was thinking about the close shave, he put his sword horizontally across his neck like it was done in the movies and laughed bitterly, saying, "What instruction does Empress Dowager have?"

Li Yanyan heaved a sigh and said, "Sheathe your sword first, and then come sit in front of me!"

Xiang Shaolong silently sheathed his sword and moved to a point ten steps from her and sat down comfortably. His manner was neither overbearing nor servile.

In this era, heroes are esteemed. It was not certain whether Xiang Shaolong was truly heroic, but he came from the 21st Century where everyone was equal. Even though he observed the customs of the present era and stood on ceremony when needed, he involuntarily displayed a 'fearing no one, neither heaven nor earth' attitude. This caused others to feel that he is distinctively high-spirited.

Li Yanyan scrutinized him for a good while before sighing and saying, "Has Elder Brother ever asked you to assassinate Lord Chunshen?"

This time it was Xiang Shaolong's turn to be startled. Li Yanyan was unexpectedly sharp, arriving at this conclusion from the fact that Li Yuan had hidden him behind the screen to eavesdrop and then deliberately slandered Lord Chunshen.

Pretending to mutter irresolutely, he said, "Imperial Uncle

might have had this intention, but he has yet to mentioned it to the small official."

Li Yanyan's voice turned cold and she said, "Once you have murdered Lord Chunshen, do you think any member of your Zhuang family will be left alive?"

Xiang Shaolong could not really fathom whether she was standing on Li Yuan's side or Lord Chunshen's side and said, "Of course I will become the scapegoat!"

Li Yanyan gazed blankly for a while before saying in puzzlement, "'Scapegoat'<sup>3</sup>". What an odd expression. Having said it though, it does seem like an apt description. Lambs can only be led to the slaughter."

By this time, Xiang Shaolong is very familiar with the attitudes of people in the royal courts. Li Yanyan is just like another Zhu Ji, unbearably lonely. That is why once she ran into him, she is handily using him to while her time away. With sudden inspiration, he said, "This could also be described as 'A black dog's food is a white dog's calamity'. Isn't this even more apt?"

Li Yanyan failed to comprehend initially, but thinking it through, she laughter with a 'Pu Chi' sound. She knew that she had lost her bearing again and restrained herself, though her tone was now warmer, and she said blandly, "You really aren't the brave and straightforward person that you appear to be, only knowing how to use the sword. Ai! Please go! In

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<sup>3</sup> Chinese word for scapegoat is actually 'Dai Zui Gao Yang' literally meaning 'assuming guilt lamb'. If I'm not wrong, lambs and goats have the same name 'Yang' in Chinese.



the end, this has nothing to do with you. I was just angry that you actually had the guts to sneak a peek at me."

Xiang Shaolong did not dare to show his gleeful expression, and after kowtowing to express his thanks, stood up and said, "Would Empress Dowager please show me an open and honorable egress route."

Li Yanyan said, "After I leave, you may leave by the side door to the courtyard and then leave by the back rooms. If you do not wish for your head to roll on the ground, its best not to reveal our conversation to the Imperial Uncle. Otherwise I will not spare you."

Xiang Shaolong took her words as wind past his ears (a.k.a. in one ear and out the other) and casually muttered a response before attempting to retreat to the courtyard. Li Yanyan said in displeasure, "Stand still! Did you hear what I said?"

Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "The small official did not reply because he does not take his head as a matter of concern and hence did not really take the words seriously. However if I had revealed this to Empress Dowager, she would have been unhappy. Even if I am torn apart by five horses, I will still abide by the ruling."

Li Yanyan's apricot eyes glared with fury initially, but gradually softened again as she heard the last few words. She sighed and said, "You are not a wicked and evil person, but are candid and honest. For Dian to have produced a talent like yourself, there is yet hope for your restoration."

Go! I don't wish to see you again."

Xiang Shaolong was startled and said, "Didn't Empress Dowager ask Imperial Uncle to order us into the palace just now?"

Li Yanyan was irritated and said, "Even then do you think you can meet me so easily? Quickly get lost!"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said, "If the Empress Dowager really wants me to 'get lost', I would rather be killed by you. Has Empress Dowager ever heard of the expression 'Only to be killed, never to be insulted'?"

Li Yanyan pretended that she did not hear it, but felt herself being attracted to this person's clever language. He was enchanting and fascinating, a kind of man she had never before seen in her life. Nonetheless, since it was not appropriate for her to continue being in contact with him, she turned around and walked out the main door with a look of exasperation.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to retreat to the courtyard and quickly walked to the rear room. Li Yanyan's beautiful visage has been crammed into his heart. As he pushed open the door to go out, the shadow of a figure floated in with the fragrant wind and bumped into him.

Despite his perturbed mind, he realized that it was a woman. Not daring to let the other party enter his embrace, he stretched out his hands to restrain the other party's shoulders.

The lady cried out in alarm, raised her own hands and pressed against the pit of his stomach, thus borrowing a little momentum to retreat a few steps.

The sound of an abusive female voice came out of the rear room.

Xiang Shaolong took a look at the face of the lady that almost crashed into his chest and got a fright. If she wasn't the Guo Xiu'er who married Li Yuan, who could it be? As the servant girls behind Gui Xiu're started to swarm round, she cut them off with one hand and said in a loud but delicate voice, "Do not be rude. This is General Wan Ruiguang, a friend of Imperial Uncle."

After giving him a firm and meaningful look, Guo Xiu'er greeted and said, "Mister please forgive your servant for walking around without her eyes."

Xiang Shaolong vaguely felt that Guo Xiu'er had recognized who he was, but could not tell where he had exposed himself. He felt a big headache coming, but was also secretly happy. Returning the courtesy, he said, "It should be I who should be asking Madam Imperial Uncle for forgiveness."

Guo Xiu'er shouted to the four servant girls behind her, "Why aren't you quickly going ahead to see if Empress Dowager has left?"

The four servant girls have rarely seen this warm, graceful and elegant Madam use such an urgent and strict tone, so while whispering amongst themselves about who this person was, they hurriedly rushed to obey their orders.

Guo Xiu'er gently said, "Is General leaving? Let your servant send the General some ways!"

She led the way, and reaching the back door, she said to the two sentries, "Go and help General find a horse carriage."

One of the sentries obeyed the command and left.

Guo Xiu'er then found another excuse to send the other sentry away. When only the two of them were left, she softly said, "Xiang Shaolong! I've been thinking about you bitterly. Why have you come here? Is it to deal with Xiu'er's husband?"

Only now does Xiang Shaolong know for sure that she has seen through his disguise. He sighed, saying, "How did you know I was Xiang Shaolong?"

Guo Xiu'er said softly, "When my hands pressed against your stomach just now, I felt that phoenix shaped jade pendant on you. I have been playing with it and handling it since I was young. Of course I can recognize it! Xiu'er is very happy, you have really been wearing it continuously."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong understand.

Guo Xiu'er serenely said, "Can Shaolong let Xiu'er's husband go?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart was extremely moved. If Guo Xiu'er had wanted him dead, all she had to do was shout with her delicate voice, he would then be decimated. However, even though she had guessed that he was here to kill Li Yuan, she was not willing to do so, merely pleading for his mercy. It

was clear that she was someone who would not sell herself out once she had made up her mind.

He couldn't help but ask, "Does he love you?"

Guo Xiu'er nodded affirmatively, but sighed and said, "What use is that? He has too many women!"

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew Li Yuan was promiscuous and liked to reward himself with women. He said seriously, "Xiu'er please do not worry, my trip here is definitely not because of him."

Only after the horse carriage had gone far away did Guo Xiu'er emerge from her dejected spirit and return to the courtyard.

As the horse carriage sped out of the palace gates, two mounted men flew over. Xiang Shaolong recognized one of them as the refined and delicate Dong Luzi. This person once created a stir in the Handan martial arts tournament. Together with the other swordsman Lou Wuxin, they were the two most famous experts under Li Yuan.

Dong Luzi reigned his horse deferentially and to conveyed his regards, saying, "Imperial Uncle is waiting for Master Wan at the 'Red Embrace Mansion'. Allow your servant to lead the way."

The other person has already been ordered to defend the changed route. Xiang Shaolong laughed and said, "No need to lead. Isn't the carriage going there anyway? What is this hero's honorable name?"

Dong Luzi was a little embarrassed. They were accustomed to such people running amuck in Shouchun. Dong Luzi gave a dry cough and reported his name.

At this moment, the sound of hooves arose. A group of twenty over horsemen were on a collision course with them. The leader was approximately twenty years old and was wearing a nobleman's battledress. His facial features were coarse but heroic. With one look, one could be sure that this man was braver than most other men. Both his eyes fixed their attention on Dong Luzi, emitting a pair of cold beams, showing an excited expression.

As Dong Luzi saw this youth, he gave a cold snort and said to Xiang Shaolong in a low voice, "Master Wan! This is Lord Chunshen's seventh son Huang Zhan. He is fond of bravery and fighting. In Shouchun, he is either number one or number two in equestrian archery and sword fighting. Imperial Uncle has given us strict orders forbidding us to offend him. If he is disrespectful in speech, could Master Wan please bear with it."

As Xiang Shaolong mused that it is actually one of Shouchun's tyrannical aristocrats, Huang Zhan has cut off the route in front. His people spread out to the left and right, cutting off the traffic on the entire road.

Dong Luzi saluted and said, "Dong Luzi pays his respects to Master Huang."

Huang Zhan gave a snort and played deaf. He urged his horse on and arrived at Dong Luzi's side, giving Xiang

Shaolong an arrogant glance. Dong Luzi hurriedly said, "This is Dian's General Wan Ruiguang who has just arrived in Shouchun."

Huang Zhan's spirit rose and he gently laughed, saying, "So it is actually the Wan Ruiguang who swept Li Chuangwen out the door. Why don't we relocate somewhere and let Huang Zhan experience his brilliance so as to prevent outsiders from accusing my Shouchun of having no capable people."

Xiang Shaolong ridiculed in his heart, this is actually someone who merely likes to flaunt his military might, brave but guileless. No wonder Li Yuan is able to gain power.

Dong Luzi said in a deep voice, "Master Huang....."

Huang Zhan interrupted him in merciless disregard, saying, "Dog slave! Since when is it your turn to speak."

Dong Luzi lowered his head in silence, but it was clear he was furious in his heart.

Huang Zhan stared at Xiang Shaolong disdainfully and sneered, saying, "Is General Wan afraid?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and said, "Master Huang is overly praising my humble self. This humble self is even less likely to be so arrogant as to think that Shouchun is without capable people. But the sword under my hand is only used on the battlefield to defeat the enemy or perhaps to defend my state's fields and land. Master should understand this truth."

The colour on Huang Zhan's face changed and he said, "Are

you deriding that I do not know how to kill enemies on the battlefield?"

At this time Xiang Shaolong is even more certain that this is just a person who merely fond of bravery and fighting. He calmly said, "If Master Huang is interested, he can set a date for a public competition to compare notes. Nonetheless this matter needs the prior approval of your honorable father. Master, please!"

This speech was both hard and soft, a clear statement of 'I am not afraid of you'. Huang Zhan has never met anyone so formidable. After being in shock for a while, he shouted loudly, "That's settled then. The one surnamed Wan had better not cower back at that time."

Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and had a good laugh, saying, "Master does not have to worry. Having the chance to compete with experts is something that I, Wan Ruiguang, desire earnestly but am rarely able to fulfill."

Hearing the heroic air and confidence in his laughter, Huang Zhan was startled, turning to Dong Luzi he said, "Fragrant Splendor Pavilion's Little Ju'er belongs to me Huang Zhan. Dong Luzi, you had better not go there in the future."

Once he had finished speaking, he let out a deafening whistle and spurred his horse, leading his people away. The street is now lined with carriages and chariots.

Dong Luzi gazed at Huang Zhan's back with a hateful and poisonous look. Only after leading them to another street did he take a deep breath and say, "I really hope that



General Wan can slaughter this chap with one stroke of the sword."

Of all the cities he has been since he arrived in this era, Shouchun has most nightclubs and brothels. The most prosperous neighborhood, which was next to the inner castle, had an intensely fragrant main street aptly named 'Wine God'. Just this street alone contained more than a hundred brothels, entertainment halls and wine shops of all sizes. They were all privately owned, signaling the prosperity of the place.

According to Dong Luzi, the majority of the song courtesans came from vanquished states. Of these, the women from Yue commanded the highest prices. The 'goods' could have been 'purchased' directly from those places that have been exploited by Chu over the long term. They could also have been captive slaves from vanquished states purchased from the government. Merely thinking about these issues, Xiang Shaolong shook his head and sighed.

The Red Embrace Mansion is one of the largest song and dance establishments in Shouchun. The other two are the 'Vegetarian Goddess' and the Fragrant Splendor Pavilion that Huang Zhan warned Dong Luzi against.

The Red Embrace Mansion is formed from a cluster of courtyards surrounded by high walls. The area inside is divided into seven to eight courtyard houses. The main house was two stories high, with windows facing backwards. This provided a view of the nearby Chu palace with its

splendid, densely packed palace halls and rooms, the inner city wall, the moat and Shouchun's famous scenic spot, the Ying Garden. The Ying Lake, which is on the central axis of the garden, looked like a bright mirror embedded in the dense groves of trees. The scenery was harmonious and pleasing. The Dian King's Mansion that Xiang Shaolong was residing in was located at the Eastern end of the Ying Garden.

With Dong Luzi's guidance, Xiang Shaolong ascended to the second story of the main house. Four beautiful, colorfully attired servant girls knelt respectfully in greeting. They used two basins of clear water to wash their hands and faces. Such a show of ostentation is unmatched in the three Jin states and the strong Qin.

The manager is a big fatty called Shu Qi. This person was a topnotch boot-licker and he rarely had such a perfect occasion. Even Xiang Shaolong felt compelled to give him a reward to ease his own conscience.

Li Yuan was drinking wine in a side room in the direction of the Ying Garden. Accompanying him were the two men who were once defeated by Teng Yi, Lou Wuxin and Yan Fu. Upon seeing Xiang Shaolong, he invited him to join the party, and asked with a serious expression, "Did the Empress Dowager find out that you were sitting behind the screen?"

Xiang Shaolong was electrified, knowing that he now had to choose between buying the favor of Li Yuan and that of Li Yanyan.

He heaved a sigh and said, "Empress Dowager did give me strict orders not to reveal anything, but I, Wan Ruiguang, am not afraid of death. Not to mention that Imperial Uncle has gone all-out effort for the Zhuang family. Yes, I do not know how, but Empress Dowager knew that I was hiding behind the screen."

He had decided to buy Li Yuan's favor, though his reason was quite laughable. It was simply because Li Yanyan was a kind-hearted person. Even if he offended her, he would still have room for maneuver. Li Yuan on the other hand was an all out villain. If he found out that he himself was lying, things would invariably sour.

Li Yuan was pleased and said, "Brother Wan really thinks highly of me. I, Li Yuan, will naturally spare no effort to defend Brother Wan. Brother Wan can be at ease. Hei! Can you guess how she knew you were hiding behind the screen? I too could only figure out after it had happened."

Xiang Shaolong could not figure out and shaking his head, replied, "Imperial Uncle, please explain!"

Li Yuan said, "There are two factors. First, she had already found out from the sentry that Brother Wan and I were drinking wine and having a chat. Next is the footprint on the ground. When Empress Dowager wanted me to leave, I looked back and saw a footprint leading to the screen, immediately knowing that we had been exposed."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought, what a close shave! If he had lied and said that the Empress Dowager had just sat in a

daze for a while and then left, he would have been caught lying on the spot.

Li Yuan laughed and said, "Brother Wan! Li Yuan toasts you a cup."

Lou Wuxin, Yan Fu and Dong Luzi all raised their cups.

After the wine had made three rounds, Xiang Shaolong committed himself and said, "Empress Dowager seemed to have a faint suspicion that Imperial Uncle had indeed deliberately raised the matter concerning my country to cause me to confirm the true opponents of my Zhuang family's restoration. She even reprimanded me severely for a while."

Li Yuan said nonchalantly, "Could Brother Wan please relate the whole conversation with Empress Dowager word by word? This is vital. You must not miss or hide anything."

Xiang Shaolong immediately offered half the story, providing a description filled with half-truths. Of course he had to leave out the most critical parts like how she had seen through Li Yuan's ploy to get Xiang Shaolong to assassinate Lord Chunshen.

Li Yuan frowned in contemplation for a while then continued probing for details, compelling him to reveal even the account of how he pulled out his sword to commit suicide. With a queer expression, he said, "I understand my younger sister the Empress Dowager's temperament the best. She rarely has this many words to say to people. The most peculiar is that she did not punish Brother Wan in any way."

Turning to the rest, he said, "What do you guys think?"

Lou Wuxin and the rest all had queer expressions on their faces, but they all did not dare to reveal their thoughts.

Li Yuan became angry and said, "If I ask you guys to say it then say it! Don't you think I do not know myself? I just wanted to verify with you guys!"

Lou Wuxin lowered his head deferentially and said, "In the end Empress Dowager is a woman, maybe..... Hei! Master should understand my meaning!"

Li Yuan flashed Xiang Shaolong a glance and laughed aloud, saying, "Look at these big men being so hesitant when talking about women, isn't it ridiculous?"

Now it is Xiang Shaolong to feel strange. If Li Yuan and this beautiful younger sister have an unnatural relationship, he would have been at least a little jealous when she falls for another man. But looking at how happy he is right now, the reality and this theory don't match.

Li Yuan raised his cup for a toast and said, "Let us drink another cup!"

While still confused, Xiang Shaolong raised his cup and answered everyone's toast.

As Li Yuan put down his cup, his eyes were shining with an intimidating gleam. With a voice brimming with hope, he said, "In the end the Empress Dowager my younger sister was not able to endure loneliness and was moved by Brother Wan. Such developments between men and women are the

hardest to understand. If only this were the case, Brother Wan has hope to reclaim his country."

Xiang Shaolong secretly scolded him in his heart, First he wants me to be an assassin, now he wants me to be a male gigolo. Shaking his head, he said, "Imperial Uncle has misunderstood. Empress Dowager is only concerned about my Zhuang family's matter, that is why she had a long conversation with me and also spared me. There shouldn't be any male-female relationship."

Li Yuan excitedly said, "Of course we could be celebrating over nothing. But I will probe her with words. I know her too well. She can hide matters from anybody, but she cannot hide them from me."

Xiang Shaolong righteously said, "If Imperial Uncle asks me to raise my sword to kill the enemy, I will not crease even half an eyebrow. But....."

Li Yuan interrupted him and said, "Good! Indeed worthy of being called a man! However, has Brother Wan ever considered that people who wish to accomplish great things not only mustn't be a stickler for small matters, but must also be completely unscrupulous. If not Brother Wan should not have come to Shouchun. He should instead have slashed his way to Dian and tried to use the sword in his hands to kill the clique of traitors."

Xiang Shaolong was stumped, and at the same time became curious about one fact. He asked, "There is one thing I do not understand. In the end Li Ling is Imperial Uncle's

clansman, why is Lord Chunshen protecting him while Imperial uncle is against him?"

Li Yuan sighed and signaled to Yan Fu, saying, "Yan Fu, why don't you explain!"

Yan Fu respectfully said, "There are a few things that General Wan does not know. Even in the Li Clan, there are different factions. The most powerful is of course our Master's. The other faction is led by Master's uncle the Great Prayer Li Quan who controls all offerings and sacrifices in the country. He has recently been colluding with Minister Lord Chunshen. Li Ling and Li Chuangwen belong to that faction and are naturally against Master."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong understand.

On the surface, Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan are on good terms, but underneath they are secretly engaging in a violent struggle. Lord Chunshen is making use of the powers within the Li Clan who were hostile to Li Yuan to set him back. It was precisely because of this that Lord Chunshen changed his position from supporting the Zhuang family's restoration to opposing and sabotaging them. In the end, none of them are good guys.

Under these circumstances, Li Yanyan naturally became the pivotal person. Whoever is able to gain her support will emerge victorious.

The most powerful players in the Chu court are the Right Minister Lord Chunshen and the Left Minister Li Yuan, followed by the Great Prayer, the Great Ancestor, the Great

Justice and the Great Historian. Of the latter four, the Great Prayer who is in charge of laws and decrees is the most powerful. With the Right Minister and the Great Prayer acting together, it is no wonder that Li Yuan is at a disadvantage.

Looking from this angle, perhaps Li Yuan is not totally against the restoration of the Zhuang family. This is because once the Zhuang family is restored, they will become Li Yuan's trusted agents and a source of power, and could even help him to stabilize the other vassal states. This would cause his power to increase tremendously, giving him enough power to overwhelm his opponents.

Li Yuan said, "The Empress Dowager's invitation to the Dian Princess and Crown Prince (of Dian) was Li Quan's idea. While the idea sounds noble, it is actually to prevent you from contacting the other vassal states and forming secret agreements to the detriment of Li Ling! Does Brother Wan understand now?"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be moved to tears and said, "Many thanks to Imperial Uncle's pointers."

Li Yuan then muttered irresolutely for a while, then continued, "In this matter, let me stall the Empress Dowager. Let us temporarily put aside the matter of Lord Chunshen. The most important thing in front of us is to verify if the Empress Dowager has really taken an interest to Brother Wan. Only then can we decide what to do next."

He stretched himself and rose, saying, "I'll head back to the



palace first. Let these other three accompany you to drink and make merry. The ladies here are outstandingly good looking. Brother Wan is guaranteed to be satisfied."

How could Xiang Shaolong be in the mood for prostitutes? He stood up, saluted and said, "I appreciate Imperial Uncle's kindness. This stateless official does not have the appetite for enjoyment and merriment."

Li Yuan saw that apart from his family's restoration, he did not have a hint of interest in anything else. He happily said, "In that case, let me send Brother Wan part of the way!"

They then left together.

## CHAPTER 3

## Locked In Constant Strife

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

BACK at the Dian King's Mansion, Xiang Shaolong saw ten over palace guards standing guard at the main gate. Only upon entering did he realize that these soldiers have been personally dispatched by Li Yanyan to protect the Mansion.

The minute he entered the Mansion, he was invited by Madam Zhuang for a discussion. After hearing Xiang Shaolong's account, Madam Zhuang indignantly said, "I did not expect Lord Chunshen to be such an ungrateful person. Despite my late father-in-law favourable treatment of him in

the past, he actually colluded with the Li Clan to harm us."

Xiang Shaolong is already used to seeing people repaying kindness with evil and comforted, "The world is full of people who will forgo their integrity for wealth. Fortunately, we do not need to rely on anyone else. Once we dispose of Tian Dan, we will immediately leave this wicked place and diligently work towards the restoration of Dian. Let them kill each other."

Madam Zhuang serenely sighed and softly whispered, "Luckily, I can still rely on you."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed and changed the subject, saying, "Did anything extraordinary occur today?"

Madam Zhuang's spirit rose, "It can be said that we arrived at the right time. Each vassal lord has either sent an important minister or has come personally to express their condolences. They all cherish the memory of my late father-in-law's benevolence. Except for the Yelang people who support Li Ling, they have all indicated that if we ever take action, they can provide us with weapons, rations and money. The power of the Yelang people has increased greatly over the last few years. Everyone hopes that we restore our country and suppress the Yelang people's wild ambitions. I heard that even Yelang King Hua Ciwa is also coming to express his condolences."

Xiang Shaolong frowned, "Will Li Ling come?"

Madam Zhuang shook her head ignorantly and sighed. She smiled bitterly, "If the Chu Court allows him to come to

Shouchun, it would mean that Chu has officially recognized his position. I believe Li Yuan will not allow such a thing to happen."

Xiang Shaolong state in a deep voice, "I think there's a high chance that he is already here. Otherwise, Lord Chunshen would not have deliberately invited you back while sending people to assassinate you during your journey. In my opinion, he will be coming together with the Yelang King Hua Ciwa. The very reason Li Chuangwen forcibly occupied the Dian King's Mansion is to help Li Ling showcase his authority. Unfortunately for them, we made it back to Shouchun in one piece. With the death of King Xiaolie, Shouchun became embroiled in a big power struggle. Li Yanyan understood the complexities of this situation which explains why she dispatched soldiers to defend the Dian King's Mansion."

Madam Zhuang's complexion changed, "Shaolong! I am only a defenceless woman who is completely lost when facing such complicated matters. What can we do to counter them?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned, "There is still one thing we must clarify, Why did Great Prayer Li Quan suggest that we move into the palace? One of the reasons could be to allow Li Ling to openly and pompously move into the Dian King's Mansion. Lord Chunshen can then use our safety as an excuse to keep us in the palace akin to house arrest. Not only can they prevent us from communicating with the other vassal states, they can also openly declare that Li Ling has officially become the Lord of Dian. This method is certainly

despicable."

Madam Zhuang angrily swore, "Don't tell me that they can manipulate Li Yanyan so easily?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "We haven't really ascertained what kind of person Li Yanyan is. But from my observation, she is closer to Lord Chunshen and Li Quan in comparison to Li Yuan. Otherwise, Li Yuan would not be wild with joy when he learnt that Li Yanyan and treated me differently."

Madam Zhuang peered at him for a while and nodded, "You are certainly a man who can move a woman's heart. Li Yanyan has always hated men. Maybe she will change on your account."

Xiang Shaolong almost lost his voice and said, "She hates men? Is she a lesbian?"

Madam Zhuang was startled, "What is a lesbian?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he had a slip of the tongue and explained, "It means she likes other women who are of the same sex as she is. Hei!"

Madam Zhuang pursed her lips and smiled, "I have never heard of anything to this effect. Just that from the time she became mature, she would not touch anything that a man has touched before. She treats men even more harshly. That is the reason why Li Yuan can deduce so much from just an ordinary conversation between you and her."

At this moment, Zhuang Kong entered without even knocking on the door and announced, "The Empress

Dowager and the Great Prayer is here!"

Xiang Shaolong and Madam Zhuang stared at each other in shock. This was totally unexpected and they did not know what to do.

With her face covered with a thick veil, Li Yanyan sat on the main seat in the Dian Mansion's main hall which is facing the front door. The Great Prayer Li Quan was standing respectfully on one side holding up the royal tablet. Doughty palace guards lined the two sides of the hall until they reached the hall entrance. The atmosphere was solemn and stately.

After Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong paid their respects to Li Yanyan, the protocol official barked, "Please rise!"

Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong stood up.

Xiang Shaolong carefully stole a glance at that Great Prayer Li Quan. His face was long and narrow and his body was tall and thin, with a beautiful beard reaching his chest. He is around the age of forty and he resembled an immortal or a Taoist priest. It is a pity that his face was pale as a result of overindulgence in wine and women. He has shifty eyes which betrayed his evil character.

The Empress Dowager Li Yanyan calmly enquired, "Has the Imperial Uncle has come to see Princess and the Crown Prince (of Dian) to convey my wishes?"

Of course Madam Zhuang could not lie blatantly and while she was wondering what to reply her, Xiang Shaolong gave a

dry cough, "Empress Dowager, Imperial Uncle had....."

The Great Prayer Li Quan let out a cold snort and interrupted, "The Empress Dowager is speaking to the Princess. No one is allowed to reply on her behalf."

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to pull out his sword and slaughter him. This lord is really an insufferable bully.

Madam Zhuang coldly hissed, "My younger brother Wan Ruiguang's words are as good as my own."

Li Quan gave a cold snort and looked towards Li Yanyan's heavily veiled face.

Li Yanyan commanded, "General Wan, please speak!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that if he didn't show a little bit of his might, they would lose their standing in Shouchun. He unhurriedly and calmly questioned, "If I may ask the Empress Dowager, is the crafty villain Li Ling presently approaching Shouchun with the Yelang King in tow?"

Li Yanyan and Li Quan trembled at the same time and were stumped on the spot. The atmosphere was extremely awkward and hard to bear.

Xiang Shaolong's eyes were flashing severely. He continued in a deep voice, "Will the Empress Dowager please answer me."

Li Quan recovered from his shock and hollered, "Wan Ruiguang, how dare you be rude to the Empress Dowager?"

Irritated, Xiang Shaolong rebutted, "Great Prayer Li, please

forgive my ignorance. I am merely making enquiries regarding my State of Dian. I do not think I am rude in any way."

Li Quan has always been even more despotic than Li Yuan and has rarely been contradicted by anyone. Nonetheless, he could not be unreasonable under the present circumstances and he was momentarily speechless.

Xiang Shaolong icily gazed at him and his lips curled into a cold sneer that caused Li Quan to shiver in fear. He then turned to Li Yanyan carried on displaying a fearless attitude while quietly waiting for her reply.

Li Yanyan serenely answered, "Li Ling did request to come here, but was flatly rejected by me. I am not sure if he is travelling with the Yelang King though."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly, "In this case, I will use my head as a betting stake that Hua Ciwa and Li Ling these two colluding villains have both reached Shouchun. If not, why would there be a need to trouble the Empress Dowager and the Great Prayer to come personally to invite us back to the palace?"

Li Quan's face changed colour immediately and loudly shouted, "What audacity!"

Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and laughed wildly, "What's so audacious? Since Chu wants to decimate my Dian Kingdom and we are unwilling to bear this insult, I hereby invite Empress Dowager to return to the palace. We will all offer ourselves as sacrifices to our late king and commit suicide.



We do not need Empress Dowager to trouble herself on our account anymore."

Li Quan's complexion changed again. If this happens, it will cause all the vassal states to have the desire to secede and may even switch loyalty to the strong Qin. When that happens, it will be an enormous disaster for Chu.

This is the greatest fear of Chu.

Li Yanyan's delicate body trembled slightly and she does not know how to deal with this situation.

Madam Zhuang knelt down while embracing Zhuang Baoyi. Instead, it is this boy who kept standing straight with his head held high and not revealing the least bit of fear.

Xiang Shaolong's eyes were like an eagle's, staring hard at Li Yanyan.

Of course he would not be so stupid as to kill himself. If necessary, he will run away immediately. Whatever the case, it would be better than being under house arrest in the palace and vulnerable to anyone's attack. His greatest fear is that people will discover the flying needles on his body. By then, even Li Yuan would want to kill him.

At this moment, the noise of clashing weapons could be heard from outside. Li Yuan barrelled in while shouting angrily, "Who dares to hinder me?"

The eight imperial guards outside the door extended their halberds and cut him off.

Li Yanyan ordered delicately, "Let Imperial Uncle come in!"

The halberds withdrew and Li Yuan sheathed his sword. He displayed a heroic spirit as if the whole world is under his feet.

Xiang Shaolong saw Madam Zhuang's beautiful eyes gazing at Li Yuan, betraying an intoxicated expression. While concerned, he could not do anything at the moment.

Li Yuan strode to Xiang Shaolong's side and stood up after paying his respects. Li Quan sneered and said, "Imperial Uncle...."

Li Yanyan coldly cut him off and said, "I will handle this!"

Li Yuan flashed Li Quan a disdainful look and state in a deep voice, "Forgive me for not knowing how to flatter. If Empress Dowager continues to be misled by evil men, our country's demise is at hand."

In defiance of Li Yanyan's order, Li Quan argued, "What is the meaning of the Left Minister's words? Explain yourself or I will hold you accountable."

Following that, he knelt down in front of Li Yanyan and kowtowed, "Empress Dowager, please be the arbitrator. Even when the late king was around, he has never said a single word of insult to me."

Xiang Shaolong mused to himself that this Li Quan was not some decent guy; no wonder he has been bribed by Lord Chunshen. Unexpectedly, the power in Qin, Chu and Zhao has all fallen into the hands of the Empress Dowagers,

though for different reasons. Zhao's King Xiaocheng lived an excessive life and died under his extravagant lifestyle. Qin's King Zhuangxiang was poisoned by Lu Buwei, while Chu's King Xiaolie probably died under the hands of Li Yanyan.

Because Li Yanyan's face was hidden by her veil, she appears mysterious and it was hard to guess her intentions. After a long silence, she slowly said, "Imperial Uncle should refrain from using such frightening words to scare people."

In reality, Xiang Shaolong still does not know where Li Yanyan stands. She seems to be protective of the Zhuang family but this could also be her putting up an act. But one thing is for sure, Regarding helping Zhuang Baoyi reclaim the throne; she is definitely siding Li Quan and Lord Chunshen. Otherwise, she would not have appeared in the Dian King's Mansion.

When she had ordered Li Yuan to bring the entire Zhuang family and staff to the palace this morning, she must have already known of Li Ling's arrival in Shouchun.

Li Yuan heaved a big sigh and remarked with disappointment, "I have already said all that I wanted to say. The past sages have a saying, 'going against the popular sentiment, one will surely fail'. Presently, Li Ling has colluded with the Yelang people and they are forcing their will on the other vassal states and harbour wild ambitions. The ridiculous thing is that some people are turning a blind eye and even lending them a helping hand, causing the vassal states to consider defecting to Qin. Judging by the number

of people jostling to visit the Dian Crown Prince since he arrived in Shouchun, we know where the popular sentiment lies. It is definitely not empty talk when I say that the Empress Dowager has been misled by evil men and that the demise of Chu is near. If we lose our South-western territories, the strong army of Qin can invade us directly by marching straight in. Within a month, their soldiers would be outside the walls of Shouchun. At that time, it would be too late to try to appease the vassal states."

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel that Li Yuan is really serious about the Zhuang family's restoration. He may be an unscrupulous man but in the end, he is someone who loves his country and his family.

To a certain extent, if he wants to remain in Shouchun, he would have to cast his lot with Li Yuan.

If Li Yuan is disposed of, he would not be able to survive too.

This matter is really hard to predict. Even if the great prophet of the day Zou Yan were to tell him about this outcome, he would not have believed him.

The kneeling Li Quan cried with a weeping voice, "Empress Dowager, please disregard these erroneous words and slanderous talk. I am only following the instructions the late King left behind. The Empress Dowager should understand."

At this point, Xiang Shaolong finally grasped Li Yanyan's position.

She really isn't in favour of Li Ling nor was she leaning

towards Li Quan or Lord Chunshen. Rather, she was following the last wishes of Chu King Xiaolie by trying to use Li Ling to bring all the vassal states back under the direct control of Chu.

Li Yuan has actually discerned that this was an unworkable plan. This together with the Li Clan's internecine struggle has caused the deadlock today.

Xiang Shaolong put himself in her shoes and couldn't help but feel a headache at the choice she has to make.

Li Yuan is actually much sharper than Li Yanyan. At least he has the courage to go against King Xiaolie's random orders.

Madam Zhuang is still kneeling silently on the floor, her eyes repeatedly scanning Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan. Perhaps she is having trouble choosing between the two.

Li Yanyan heaved a sigh and said, "Let's discuss this issue later! I wish to return to the palace."

Li Quan urgently and fearfully called out, "Empress Dowager!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud, "Great Prayer Li had better tell the traitor Li Ling that regardless of size of his army, I, Wan Ruiguang, vow to cut down the head on his neck."

Li Yanyan's delicate body jolted and she stood up.

Xiang Shaolong, Li Yuan and Zhuang Baoyi hurriedly kneeled down in respect.

Li Yanyan slowly state, "Li Ling's arrival at the capital was

without my permission. Li Quan, please instruct him to remain in the Yelang King's Mansion. He is not allowed to step out of the mansion gates at all. If he is still killed by someone despite this, he can only blame his bitter fate."

Turning to Li Yuan, she said, "Imperial Uncle will select a regiment of palace guards to stand guard at the Dian King's Mansion round the clock. If anyone comes to cause trouble, he is to be killed immediately without pardon."

Amidst the sound of the royal entourage returning to the palace, this number one beauty of Chu exited the door with eight palace maids escorting her.

Li Quan's incomparably hateful eyes swept over Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong before he followed the royal party out.

Madam Zhuang personally poured a cup of wine for Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong and flashed Li Yuan an enchanting smile, "Only till today do I know who is sparing no effort to help our Zhuang family. Let us brother and sister toast the Imperial Uncle."

Li Yuan toasted, "One day when I, Li Yuan, am able to defeat the traitors within the Court, I will guarantee that the Dian Crown Prince will be able to sit on the Dian throne peacefully. I will swear with this cup of wine."

Hot tears of gratitude gushed forth from Madam Zhuang's graceful eyes. After the toast, she lowered her head and promised, "The Imperial Uncle has such a profound love for righteousness, even if I have to work like a bull or horse, I will be most willing."

Li Yuan's two eyes gleamed and he said with mucho grace, "The Dian Princess is giving me too much credit."

Even though Xiang Shaolong does not harbour any intentions on Madam Zhuang, he felt uneasy that she is allowing Li Yuan to gorge himself on her. Fortunately he had a broad mind. After drinking a cup, he threw out his concerns.

Madam Zhuang secretly stole a glance at Xiang Shaolong. Her lips cracked into a smile and she gently said, "Ruiguang, you should stop after drinking another cup."

Turning to Li Yuan, she explained, "This little brother of mine can hold his liquor well, but no matter how much he drinks, his face will not turn red."

Xiang Shaolong had a fright and secretly praised Madam Zhuang's attentiveness. His face was covered with thick makeup so no matter how much he drinks; his face is certainly not going to turn red.

Li Yuan smiled, "Dian Princess, please forgive Li Yuan for being presumptuous. I would like to exchange a few words with Brother Wan in private."

Xiang Shaolong and Madam Zhuang were both startled.

Madam Zhuang gently nodded her head and departed the hall. She even helped the two men to close the door as she left.

Li Yuan faced Xiang Shaolong in a daze for a long time before giving a long sigh, declaring, "Xiang Shaolong! I, Li Yuan take

my hat off you!"

Xiang Shaolong was immediately frightened out of his wits, his hands pressed down on his sword hilt.

Li Yuan raised both his hands to show that he is unarmed and coaxed, "Brother Xiang should not be alarmed. If I really wanted to deal with you, I would not have come here to drink wine with you."

Xiang Shaolong calmed down and laughed, asking, "How did you recognize me?"

Li Yuan replied, "The first time I saw Brother Xiang, I already felt that you looked familiar, but felt that this was an impossible matter. Moreover you have grown a long beard and the shape of your face is different. Your hair colour and skin colour are both greatly different from before, plus your speech carried a Dian accent. I had to believe that some people really do look alike."

He continued to shake his head and smiled, "Actually I was here for some time already and was outside the door looking at Brother Xiang's brilliant move of turning the tables around. At that time not only did you forget to mask your voice, you even exhibited your usual bearing. That is something unique to you and there is no other like that. Unless I am blind or deaf, how could I not know you are Xiang Shaolong?"

Xiang Shaolong asked curiously, "Brother Li and I are enemies, so why are you now treating me as a long lost friend and leisurely having an intimate conversation?"



Li Yuan leaned forward and sighed, "The discord between me and Brother Xiang started over Talented Lady Ji. At that time, I really wished I can tear you into pieces. But now, the rice has already been cooked. Ai!"

Deep pain shot out from Li Yuan's eyes. He lamented, "In life, we have to move on. What do I have to gain by killing Xiang Shaolong other than to cause the Talented Lady Ji to hate me for a lifetime? Worse still, if she committed suicide in the name of love, I will be even more miserable."

For the first time ever, Xiang Shaolong is seeing the emotional side of Li Yuan. He was a little moved and apologised, "I did not expect Brother Li to have such magnitude; I have been disrespectful."

Who would have thought that after only two days in Shouchun, he has been recognized by both Guo Xiu'er and Li Yuan. It seems like the disguise is not helping very much. Fortunately, besides Tian Dan, Han Chuang, Guo Kai and a limited number of people, there is no one else in Shouchun who recognizes him.

Li Yuan looked like he was full of thoughts and feelings and after many gasps and long sighs, he state with disgust, "Whether you believe it or not, even if Brother Xiang walks out to the street and shouts loudly 'I am Xiang Shaolong', I guarantee that nobody will dare to touch you. Everyone knows that you are a confidante to the Qin Crown Prince and Empress Dowager. Moreover, the Qin military holds you in the highest regard. If you are killed today, the Qin army will

march here tomorrow. Only Brother Xiang doesn't realize this himself! Presently, under the skies, only Lu Buwei and Tian Dan dare to take your life."

Xiang Shaolong checked in a deep voice, "This is precisely the issue that bothers me. Didn't Brother Li and Tian Dan form an alliance?"

Li Yuan fiercely said, "Please do not mention this ungrateful old fox again. After reaching Shouchun and finding out that Lord Chunshen is more influential than me, he changed sides very quickly and is now supporting him. He just moved into Lord Chunshen's mansion yesterday and even revealed all my plans to Lord Chunshen. Fortunately I have spies in Lord Chunshen's mansion or else I would not even know how I died."

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization and he laughed, "So this is it!"

Li Yuan's brazen face turned red and he asked, "How did Brother Xiang know that Tian Dan has come here?"

There was no more point in concealing the truth from him. Xiang Shaolong revealed the entire story and as Li Yuan listened, he couldn't help sighing and exclaiming how lucky he was.

After all the odds and ends had been clarified, Li Yuan seriously state, "I know it is not easy to get Brother Xiang to trust me completely. Brother Xiang should know by now that I am in a disadvantageous situation. I also know that the two tasks that Brother Xiang wants to achieve, the killing of Tian

Dan and the restoration of the Dian Kingdom which are the hardest tasks of all. But if we work together, maybe all these impossible tasks will become easier to accomplish."

Xiang Shaolong nodded, "Who can refuse this kind of win-win partnership? But I need to understand something first. Does Brother Li know about Lu Buwei's plot to make use of Chu people's hands to kill Xu Xian?"

Li Yuan said, "Of course I know and how could I, Li Yuan, be tricked by Lu Buwei? If Xu Xian dies under the hands of our Chu people, coupled with the fact that he is coming here to offer condolences to the late King, the consequences will certainly be unimaginable."

In the past, Xiang Shaolong would never have believed Li Yuan. But now after understanding his position and knowing that the most influential person in Shouchun is Lord Chunshen and not Li Yuan, he has no more reason to suspect him.

Right now, Li Yuan's utmost priority is preserving his life followed by power-grabbing.

Just by looking at Lord Chunshen's seventh son Huang Zhan's attitude this afternoon, he can easily guess what the rest of his men are like.

Li Yuan suddenly jolted and exclaimed, "No good!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and asked, "What's the matter?"

Li Yuan's complexion turned pale and slapping the table in

anger, he roared, "Lord Chunshen really doesn't understand the bigger picture. In order to win the trust of Tian Dan and Lu Buwei, he has unexpectedly committed this folly."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank. With an ashen face like a corpse, Li Yuan explained, "Fifteen days ago, Lord Chunshen's sixth son Huang Hu led three thousand family warriors heading West on boats. That was the day after we received word of Xu Xian's trip to Shouchun. I was suspicious then, but did not think that Lord Chunshen would be so senile, not recognizing the gravity of matters."

Xiang Shaolong sighed, "In reality, Lord Chunshen and Tian Dan have always been conspiring with each other. You may not know that Zhao Mu is really Lord Chunshen's fifth son. That year, Xiao Weimou came to Wei to kill me as requested by Lord Chunshen."

As Li Yuan heard this, he became mute and stared blankly, knowing that he has been used by Tian Dan while he himself had trusted Tian Dan completely in a vain attempt at getting the help of the Qi people to deal with Lord Chunshen.

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hand and said, "This alliance is formed!"

Li Yuan exulted and stretching out his own hand with a firm grip, he said, "I have always trusted Brother Xiang."

He turned a little awkward and said, "Nonetheless I also know that Brother Xiang does not dare to fully trust me yet. Right now I swear an oath to heaven that if I violate this agreement, may I be pierced to death by ten thousand

arrows."

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised him in his heart. This is because if Li Yuan is not able to gain his complete confidence, he needs to safeguard himself in every aspect. It will be a weak partnership.

Thinking about it, he felt hilarious. Not too long ago, the two of them are still trying to kill each other. Now, being compelled by tough circumstances, they have become comrades-in-arms.

Li Yuan's spirits rose dramatically and suggested, "The first step we will take is to kill Li Ling to show them who's boss, what do you think?"

The two of them looked at each other and broke out into laughter, enjoying the feeling of being well-matched partners.

## CHAPTER 4

## Escape By A Hair's Breadth

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

XIANG SHAOLONG escorted Li Yuan out of the residence. Li Yuan's thirty-plus bodyguards had been waiting forever. Before mounting his horse, Li Yuan softly asked, "Is Yanran here?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded slightly.

Li Yuan mumbled for a while then laughed bitterly and said, "I am deeply envious of Brother Xiang."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Do you wish to see her?"

At first, Li Yuan appeared pleasantly surprised, then changed his mind and shook his head, saying, "Meeting her is as good as not meeting her. Brother Xiang, please help to convey my regards. Tell her that she, Ji Yanran, is the lady that I love and respect the most."

Laughing at the sky, he mounted his horse and led his bodyguards out the main gate, swift as a tornado.

Xiang Shaolong sighed sadly, shaking his head. He then returned to the residence intending to seek out Ji Yanran to make a report. He was intercepted by Madam Zhuang on the way and led to an empty room. She asked softly, "What did Li Yuan and you talk about?"

Xiang Shaolong recalled her earlier confused and intoxicated disposition towards Li Yuan and was peeved. He coldly said, "It was all about slaughter and bloodshed, nothing special."

Madam Zhuang bent closer and scrutinized his eyes. An unnatural feeling seeped through him from top to bottom. Madam Zhuang laughed with a soft flowery voice, saying, "Shaolong is a little jealous. I am very happy."

Xiang Shaolong thought he might as well vent his anger, saying, "This is not about jealousy. It is about one man having to listen to a woman telling another man that she is willing to become a bull and a horse for him. Its about respect and dignity. Can you please take your hands off me?"

Madam Zhuang drew even closer. She leaned close to his ear, speaking as airily as a silkscreen, "If the person I was

saying it to was Xiang Shaolong and not Li Yuan, the words would have been changed to 'becoming a concubine and maid servant'. Does Shaolong understand the difference?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "Am I a person who can be deceived or pacified easily? Does Madam dare to say that she is not moved by Li Yuan?"

As he said this, he was secretly startled as he realized that he had himself been moved slightly by Madam Zhuang.

He is usually very gracious with women, rarely scolding them or causing them harm. Even towards those like Dan Meimei and Gui Yan who conspired to murder him, he had never had the intention of settling this score with them.

The person who has received the most scolding from him is Zhao Ya, but in the end he has still forgiven her and he now loves her as before.

So why is he losing his temper on Madam Zhuang?

Xiang Shaolong has met his share of setbacks, and he does not want to be like the other men in this era, treating women as goods where 'the more is the merrier', widely collecting concubines. Nonetheless this is but wishful thinking on his part. It is the women instead who constantly throw themselves into his embrace, gladly and willingly joining his brood of wives and concubines.

Men are not like dense wood, who are unfeeling.

Moreover he is naturally softhearted towards women, that is why he has always been careful, trying to avoid getting



entangled in more male-female relationships. Till today, the only one who has caused him to lose his restraint is Qin Qing. He has managed to have self-control with everyone else.

Nonetheless, Madam Zhuang's situation was unique.

Regardless of whether she is successfully restored to her country, she will not become his concubine. It is a matter of status. Madam Zhuang and her son have become the legitimate symbol recognized by all the Dian people. If Madam Zhuang marries out, this symbolism will be destroyed.

She can still have affairs with men, this is after all a common thing in that era.

That is why even if an affair develops between Xiang Shaolong and Madam Zhuang, it will have to be brief and momentary. Once Zhuang Baoyi ascends the throne and Xiang Shaolong leaves Dian, this bout of passion between them would have to die a natural death.

It is precisely because of the lack of this mental barrier and also because of the fact that Xiang Shaolong has a lot of pity for this isolated and helpless mother and son, that is why without realizing it, he has gradually accepted Madam Zhuang. Perhaps this is a case of 'familiarity breeds fondness'.

He himself was unaware of the fact. Only after reflecting on his present anger did he awaken to this fact.

Despite being scolded, Madam Zhuang react like one who has been reprimanded, and in fact replied with a straight face, "You are right. Li Yuan is indeed a man who has moved my heart. And even if I ignore his righteous anger, I cannot ignore his righteous support of the Zhuang family. If I had not met you, I would have used my body to repay him. But I won't do that now, because I am afraid that you will despise me. Now that I have bared myself like this, are you satisfied?"

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh and said, "However you have now aroused Li Yuan's heart, are you sure you are able to control the situation?"

Madam Zhuang replied, "Do not worry. I have ample experience dealing with men."

She then laughed a foxy laugh before saying, "I did that on purpose just now just to see if I could get any reaction from you the hard-hearted man. Now I know finally. Ai! Shaolong, let me serve you in the bedroom tonight, alright?"

Xiang Shaolong thought about Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi and hardened his heart, saying, "We had a prior agreement and the larger matter is more important. It is better to put aside our feelings and sexual desires temporarily."

Madam Zhuang was so touched that her eyes reddened. Hanging her head, she said, "You are still the first and only man I have met who helped me for any reason other than my looks."

As she said this, she held on to him even more tightly and

closely.

Only then did Xiang Shaolong reveal that his identity had been exposed and that he had formed an alliance with Li Yuan. Madam Zhuang was stunned to silence and she listened in a daze. Celebrating the good news, she forced Xiang Shaolong to cuddle with her for a lingering moment before letting him go.

Xiang Shaolong returned to his residence and repeated the story to Ji and Zhao the two ladies. Both ladies also listed in stupefied silence and amazement. It was hard to imagine that the situation would have developed in such an unexpected way.

Ji Yanran happily said, "Li Yuan is self-centered and mercenary, petty and unscrupulous. Nonetheless he is also a knowledgeable minister. Under the present circumstances, forming an alliance with you is the smartest thing to do. Moreover, with you as a friend, perhaps he can deceive Qin into choosing some other country as its first target of conquest."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly and said, "It is very difficult for me to say anything in this matter. If you do not attack others, others will attack you. Its not just friends who can become enemies, even fathers and sons and elder and younger brothers can fall out and become enemies. The Talented Lady Ji is proficient in history and should appreciate this point."

Zhao Zhi nodded and said, "Hubby is right, let alone the fact

that Shaolong now has friends everywhere. Even if he wanted to help, he wouldn't know which country to help first."

Xiang Shaolong confessed, "I am a person who just loves peace and hates war. In the future when the Crown Prince (of Qin) has ascended the throne, let us go far away, look for some plains or valleys with beautiful mountains and rivers and live till we are old. Don't you think that would be so enjoyable?"

The ladies were so moved that they threw themselves into his bosom.

At this moment, Jing Shan came in and reported that the Inner City Official Qu Shiming was seeking an audience.

Xiang Shaolong was greatly astounded. Only after asking Ji Yanran did he find out that the Inner City Official was the Commander of the Inner City Guards. With a belly full of suspicion, he hurriedly rushed to the front hall to receive the visitor.

Qu Shiming was about thirty years old. He had a serious attitude but had a friendly face. He was tall and had handsome features, giving others a very good impression.

However, this was but a facade. This was because Xiang Shaolong detected within his eyes an essence that was completely different from his external appearance, suggesting that Qu Shiming was the kind of person who would conceal a knife behind his smile.

They exchanged pleasantries.

Qu Shiming then said, "The Empress Dowager has ordered me to come to invite General Wan to the palace. Is General Wan able to leave immediately?"

Xiang Shaolong calculated that it was now the full light of day, and that the route to the palace was through the main street. He should not be afraid of any tricks. Moreover, even if something untoward did arise, he would be able to escape amidst the tide of people on the main street. He nodded in agreement and, mounting a horse, followed the official towards the palace.

Along the way, Qu Shiming pointed out the scenery and buildings and talked jovially, actually providing Xiang Shaolong with a lot of intelligence. At least he now knew that the cluster of imposing buildings beside the palace was actually Lord Chunshen's official residence. Li Yuan's Left Minister's official residence was diagonally opposite that of Lord Chunshen's.

Since Li Yuan had residences inside and outside the palace, it did seem that his relationship with Li Yanyan was closer than that of her with the other members of the Li Clan and Lord Chunshen. It is no wonder that despite having roused the jealousy of Lord Chunshen, Lord Chunshen had yet to be able to deal with him.

However, with Li Ling entering Shouchun, and with Tian Dan and Lord Chunshen's open collusion, this equilibrium is sure to be upset.

After entering the palace, everyone dismounted.

Qu Shiming said in a low voice, "The Empress Dowager wishes to meet you in her Eastern palace's Heart Nourishing Garden. This is where she usually entertains herself with the zither. If she is in a good mood, she may even play a song for Mister."

Xiang Shaolong secretly wondered, could Li Yanyan really have fallen for himself? Thinking about it some more, he felt that it was an impossibility. How could a woman who hated men suddenly transform within two days?

Dwelling on the thought was futile, so all he could do was follow Qu Shiming.

Eight of the guards were ahead opening the way. The other sixteen guards followed behind. This level of protection did appear a little over-the-top, but it could also have signified Li Yanyan's desire to ensure his safety.

These twenty-four guards were clearly special crack troops. They were all valiant with thick necks and broad shoulders, and all were powerful and skilled fellows. If the entire Chu army was of this caliber, even the Qin people would not be able to defeat them.

At this moment, Xiang Shaolong and Qu Shiming were being crowded by the guards from the front and back while crossing a small lane paved with crushed rocks. All around were luxuriant and tightly packed flowers and plants. With little pagodas and bridges, running water and fishponds, the garden was teeming with life.

On the left beyond the grass and trees was a row of residences, but it seemed as if they were unoccupied.

In the four directions, the place was quiet and empty of people.

Qu Shiming pointed to the residences and said, "General Wan, please take a look."

Xiang Shaolong looked where he was pointing, and asked curiously, "Look at what?"

Right at this moment, he suddenly felt a sharp and hard object press heavily against his right waist, emitting a ding sound.

Xiang Shaolong instantly realized what was happening.

Qu Shiming had surreptitiously stabbed at him with his dagger but had hit the concealed sack with his flying needles.

Without thinking, he lashed out an elbow at Qu Shiming's side.

Qu Shiming dropped the dagger as his hand was jolted. As the sound of broken bones was heard from his side, he fell to the ground in distress, but he did not forget to shout, "Attack!"

The first person to move was Xiang Shaolong. Blood Wave, which had been put in a new scabbard to fool people, flew out. The closest two people in front were slashed in the neck and fell to the ground with blood splashing.

Xiang Shaolong knew it was not advisable to match the enemy with force and bending his body, jumped into a small thicket and rolled out the other side. By this time, the enemy had already launched an all-out offensive.

There were two men each on the left and right attacking towards him without regard for their lives, intrepid as insane tigers.

Xiang Shaolong knew he could not retreat and gathered his enemy-crushing fighting spirit. He dashed forward, trampling on an untold number of fresh flowers, but was able to escape the danger of being surrounded. He then turned around abruptly and struck out like lightning using Blood Wave.

These guards were really carefully selected experts. The point person shifted his sword to block the swift and sharp attack, but was unable to block the kick that came from underneath. He was hit in the groin and fell to the ground with a wretched howl.

The two rushing in from behind were unable to change their stances in time and almost tripped and fell to the ground.

Xiang Shaolong rose explosively and swept round with his sword. The two guards dropped their swords and fell to the ground, dying violently on the spot.

At this moment, even more people flocked over from three directions in front. They had all appeared from the underbrush and vegetation.



None of them shouted any sort of challenge but attacked silently.

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden inspiration, and while shouting loudly made a dash towards the residences on the left.

As he was rushing across a small bridge, the sound of wind came from the rear. Xiang Shaolong knew that it was not good and tumbled onto the bridge. Above him a long sword swept past the thin air.

Xiang Shaolong jumped up on the bridge and used a stance of 'Attacking To Defend', creating waves of sword pressure, causing the two guards dashing up to defend themselves frantically.

With a 'Qiang!' sound the person on the left was left with half a sword.

It's a pity that Xiang Shaolong had also lost the opportunity to kill him. While forcing the other person to retreat, he saw seven to eight enemies crossing the stream under the bridge, seemingly with the intention of intercepting him on the other end of the bridge.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the enemy in front of him and jumped on the bridge railing, and with a mid-air somersault, jumped onto a patch of grass on one side.

Two of the enemies immediately threw themselves towards him.

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented. All these people were fierce and skilled in martial arts, and with their sheer

numbers, they were fully capable of killing him many times over. If he was surrounded and had to fight a head-on battle, he was sure to suffer an unlucky fate. He ferociously clenched his teeth and rolled on the ground again.

Those two enemies were brave but had never before seen such fighting techniques. As they hesitated in panic, one of them had already been kicked on the lower limbs by Xiang Shaolong's two legs, falling to the ground. The other person was stabbed in the belly by Blood Wave.

In all four directions the garden was filled with human shadows and sword flashes.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the person on the ground and rolled towards a large tree at the side. As he hit the tree, his body leaped up. Three long swords thrust towards him from different angles.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this was a critical juncture. If he could not break out of the encirclement, he would definitely die today. With a wild shout, he used his last resort, the 'Attacking And Defending At The Same Time' stance. All three swords were 'stuck' to the sword light that he drew, and they were forced back by his boundless sword power.

In the blink of an eye, all the other people had madly rushed over, encircling him in a death trap.

Xiang Shaolong raised his head and saw that there was a horizontal branch reaching out above him. Above that, the foliage was even thicker. He celebrated in his heart and, while the enemy was still rushing in, sheathed his sword,

leaped up off the ground and with both hands grabbed the thick branch which was as thick as a person's arm.

The enemies jumped up waving their swords trying to attack him.

Xiang Shalong's two legs flew out to the left and right, sweeping at the blades of two swords. The two swords were swept aside.

Both legs then continued to kick out rapidly. Two of the enemies were kicked in the face. Blood spurted out and the two men staggered and stumbled to the ground.

As he used the strength of his waist to climb higher up the branch, the ground below was already filled with enemies.

Three swords flew towards him, having been thrown by some enemies.

Xiang Shaolong pasted himself against the tree trunk, avoiding the swords. He then climbed upwards rapidly.

The enemies had miscalculated, and they stood below looking at him, at a loss for what to do. At this point they could only regret not having brought crossbows.

After he had reached the top of the tree, he was already about eighty to ninety feet off the ground.

Xiang Shaolong was beside himself with joy. He opened his throat and hollered madly to the sentries on the sentry post, "Rebellion! Rebellion!"

Four of the enemies had begun to climb upwards.

Xiang Shaolong was not anxious but was instead rejoicing. He drew Blood Wave and attacked downwards. Using the advantage of higher ground, he chopped and sliced, sending the four attackers tumbling down the tree. From observation, it would be hard for them to live.

At this point, Qu Shiming laboriously arrived at the bottom of the tree, clutching the broken bones at his side. He was nonetheless also unable to devise a plan, and with no other choice, he shouted, "Cut down the tree!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud and said, "Thanks for the hard work!"

Given that the tree was thicker than a man's arms could envelop, they would need at least an hour to cut it down just using their swords.

At this moment, an uncountable number of guards spilled over from all directions.

Qu Shiming's complexion changed completely, shouting, "Go!"

However, he was a moment too late. The guards had surrounded both the attackers and the tree. Upon seeing that it's their superior Qu Shiming, they all stopped in a daze.

"The Empress Dowager arrives!"

All the guards knelt on the ground.

The Xiang Shaolong who was at the treetop found it inconvenient to kneel in greeting while on the tree so

naturally he did not.

He has finally escaped this dangerous assassination attempt.

All because he was lucky.

## CHAPTER 5

## Exposed Again

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

THE Empress Dowager's palace.

Qu Shiming and the seventeen subordinates who perpetrated the sneak attack on Xiang Shaolong had been bound and were kneeling before Li Yanyan's dais. Five amongst them have suffered various degrees of sword wounds and were covered with blood. They were all looking very sad and pathetic.

Including Qu Shiming, of the twenty-five would-be assassins, seven had been killed by Xiang Shaolong.

Li Quan and all the major officials who were in the palace at that time rushed over on receiving the news. Of these two were precisely Great General Dou Jie and the Minister-of-State Cheng Suning.

This Dou Jie was originally someone who adhered to Li Yuan, but later defected Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's side after recognizing that Lord Chunshen was more powerful. Cheng Suning has always been Li Quan's lackey. It was him who despatched his nephew Cheng Qi and family warriors to impersonate boatmen with the intention of killing Madam Zhuang mother and son on the Huai River.

Dou Jie and Cheng Suning are both about forty years old, with the former having a formidable appearance filled with the air of a Great General. The latter has a pale complexion, and one could determine with one glance that he was someone deep into wine and women.

Besides these two there was also Outer City Official Wu Zhan and the Royal Guard Captain Lian Anting who was responsible for the security of the Empress Dowager and the Crown Prince of Chu. Xiang Shaolong leisurely and contentedly stood downward of the dais from Li Quan, followed by Wu Zhan and Lian Anting.

Across from them is Dou Jie and Cheng Suning. Qu Shiming's face is ashen as a corpse and his head is lowered in silence.

Li Yanyan is wearing her phoenix coronet but is without her heavy veil. Her jade face that was peerlessly splendid within Chu carried a severe and frosty expression. Her eyes flashing

with prestige, she asked, "Whats the matter here? Who incited this?"

Qu Shiming reported with his head still lowered, "After Wan Ruiguang arrived in Shouchun, he went on a rampage, making it seem like our Great Chu did not have any capable people. Today he even offended the Empress Dowager in the Dian King's Mansion. And even more he has obviously killed people. I was indignant and decided to teach him a lesson. Nobody incited me to do this."

Li Yuan's voice sounded from the entrance, and with a long laugh, he said, "How did Wan Ruiguang run amuck? If you Qu Shiming had your home forcibly occupied by someone else, what would you do?"

Everyone looked towards the entrance and saw Li Yuan walking in rapidly in high spirits. He first greeted Li Yanyan, then came to Xiang Shaolong's side, showing clearly that they were standing together.

Li Quan sneered and said, "There is some discrepancy in the Left Minister's words. How could the two matters be mentioned together? When Li Ling occupied and administered the Dian King's Mansion, the late King was still around but he never said anything to oppose it, clearly....."

Li Yanyan coldly cut him off, saying, "Great Prayer!"

Li Quan glared at Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong and gave a "Humph!", but did not continue. Everyone could tell, though, that what he wanted to say was that Li Chuangwen's forceful occupation of the Dian King's Mansion was with the tacit



consent and approval of the devil Xiaolie.

Dou Jie gave a dry cough and said, "Qu Shiming concealed matters from the Empress Dowager and committed an offense in the palace. This is certainly against military discipline, but he was merely aroused by righteous indignation and is pardonable. I hope that Empress Dowager will deal with this leniently."

He is a major figure in the Chu military and even the Empress Dowager had to consider his words. From this, it can be seen that Lord Chunshen now has an overwhelming advantage in power.

Cheng Suning also pleaded for mercy, saying, "Qu Shiming merely wanted to burst General Wan's bubble a little and did not have the intention to kill. Empress Dowager can see clearly."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly, "This is strange indeed. None of you were around just now, how could you be sure that General Qu merely wanted to teach me a lesson? Could it be that you have agreed on this from the beginning?"

Cheng Suning was stumped to silence and could only glare at Xiang Shaolong fiercely with a poisonous expression.

The Royal Guard Captain Lian Anting bowed and said, "Empress Dowager can see clearly. When the small official led his men to the East Garden, Official Qu and the others were holding their swords. It is not a case of the usual disturbance or fight. Moreover the corpses of the seven people who died are distributed within the garden, clearly

the result of intense battle and violent pursuit."

Li Quan sneered, "Does the Royal Guard Captain have some ulterior motive for saying this?"

Lian Anting is obviously a person with extreme restraint. His countenance did not change one bit, even having been openly accused by Li Quan of coveting the Inner City Official position which is one level above his. He said, "Great Prayer Li's words are too serious. This official is but reporting the actual situation to the Empress Dowager. If I deliberately conceal anything, I will lose my job."

Li Yuan laughed and said, "Deliberately distorting the facts not only carries the threat of dismissal, it is also the crime of deceiving the monarch. Great Prayer Li should not overly neglect your form."

Li Quan angrily said, "Left Minister....."

Li Yanyan interrupted him, and turning to the as yet silent Outer City Official Wu Zhan and asked, "Does General Wu have any opinion on this matter?"

Wu Zhan controlled the city's defense so he wielded enormous power. His position was at the same level as Dou Jie, but he has always been even-handed and impartial. That is why his words have exceptional influence.

The lion-like Wu Zhan's large eyes, which looked like copper bells, emitted a cold and severe expression and landed on Qu Shiming. He said in a deep voice, "Indiscriminately using the knife and sword within the palace is a big crime. Worse

still is murder, which is unforgivable. Nonetheless since Official Qu claims that it is casual fighting and disturbance, we should clarify matters. Empress Dowager only needs to allow me to bring the offenders away to be interrogated separately, I guarantee that the whole truth will be revealed."

The countenance of Li Quan, Dou Jie and the rest changed immediately. Who would have thought that Wu Zhan did not take into account one bit of their feelings and sensibilities. If all this group of background instigators are reveal, it would be an even worse disaster for them.

At this moment, the gate official sang out, "Lord Chunshen arrives!"

Lord Chunshen was followed by a warrior general on each side. One of them is his fifth son Huang Zhan, who rushed into the hall in a torrent.

As they paid their respects, Li Yuan quietly informed Xiang Shaolong that the other person was Lord Chunshen's third son Huang Ba.

Lord Chunshen arrived and stood upstream of Dou Jie and completely beyond everyone's expectation, pointed his finger and started scolding Qu Shiming severely. He said, "Qu Shiming, you are the Inner Castle Official and are responsible for the security of the palace. Unexpectedly you break the law despite knowing the law, do you admit your crime?"

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan winked at each other, knowing that Lord Chunshen is going to kill them to ensure their

silence.

Qu Shiming still thought that Lord Chunshen was going to use another method to exonerate him, and hurriedly replied, "This general accepts his guilt!"

Lord Chunshen faced Li Yanyan and said, "The old official invites Empress Dowager to make an immediate decree, to behead all the offenders."

Qu Shiming started to tremble from head to toe, and raising his head, shouted in shock, "Lord! This matter...."

Huang Zhan hurried out from behind Lord Chunshen and kicked Qu Shiming on the mouth. The latter's teeth were immediately shattered and lips split. With a miserable howl, he tumble down onto the ground.

Lord Chunshen turned his head and glared at the Qu Shiming who was painfully moaning and groaning on the ground and said disdainfully, "You have committed a capital offense and you still dare to insult the Empress Dowager, even ten thousand deaths is not enough to absolve you."

With a few simple words, he has covered over Huang Zhan's act to silence the prisoner.

Li Yanyan looked at Lord Chunshen coldly, and only after a long while did she let out a sigh and say, "Men! Bring these people out of the palace hall to be hanged immediately. The Royal Guard Captain is responsible for the execution."

Lian Anting knelt to receive the order, and then instructed the guards to take Qu Shiming and the rest out.

Li Quan and the rest were all pale, but knew that this was the best way to solve the problem for them.

Li Yanyan's eyes swept over everyone. When her eyes fell on Xiang Shaolong, she stopped for quite a while, showing a perplexingly complex look, before finally coming to Wu Zhan. She said in a soft voice, "Who does General Wu think should assume the role of Inner City Official?"

Xiang Shaolong had a good feeling about the fierce general Wu Zhan, and was very interested to know his proposal.

Lord Chunshen and gang all displayed a wary look. It would appear that this Inner City Official position has a critical influence on the outcome of the battle between the two factions.

On the contrary, it was Li Yuan who's manner was calm, even revealing a smile.

Wu Zhan solemnly said, "Shouchun is now in troubled times, and even the palace grounds are no exception. This general believes that there should not be any major changes. Let us promote Official Lian up one rank. As for the Royal Guard Captain post, let the Vice Captain Du Gui fill it. Does Empress Dowager think that this is workable?"

Before Lord Chunshen and the rest could object, she preempted, "General Wu's suggestion is close to my intention. Let it be done this way. Nobody may object."

Then she continued and said, "General Wan has been startled. Please stay behind. Dismissed!"

Li Yanyan was alone waiting for Xiang Shaolong at the back of the hall. After the guards and servant maids had been driven away by her, this absolutely beautiful Empress Dowager let out a rare smile. She faced the Xiang Shaolong who was sitting downward and said, "Is it reasonable to say that General Wan is actually more famous and talented than he is presently."

Xiang Shaolong felt fear creeping into his heart, but pretended not to understand, saying, "What is the meaning of Empress Dowager's words?"

Li Yanyan flashed him a glare and said, "The people who wanted to murder you just now were all the most outstanding of the guards. Each of them can handle ten men under normal circumstances. However despite mounting a sneak attack, General Wan managed to kill seven of them while remaining completely unhurt yourself. This caused me to think of one person."

Xiang Shaolong felt a chill down his entire spine and asked, "Who did Empress Dowager think of?"

Li Yanyan changed the subject and said, "After meeting General this morning, I went to see Madam Xiu'er's embroidery. She was perturbed and made one mistake after another, and even pricked her finger. I questioned my men and found out that General and Xiu'er bumped into each other as you were leaving, and that she even arranged for a carriage to send General off. At that time I did not think of anything. But after seeing General's later performance at the

Dian King's Mansion and in the palace, I changed my thinking."

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed in alarm, knowing that she had suspicions of him.

Li Yanyan's eyes gleamed and firmly gazed at him, saying, "There is only one man under heaven who can cause Xiu'er to be so distracted after only one encounter. Can General Wan tell me who that man is?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he had been exposed. Guo Xiu'er is Li Yanyan's close friend after all, and must share her personal matters often. So when Li Yanyan discovered her strange manner, and with himself also displaying such extraordinary yet furtive conduct together with his formidable talent, this beautiful but intelligent woman was bound to guess that he was Xiang Shaolong.

This time, this pretense of his seems to have suffered setbacks everywhere and is in shambles. It is fortunate that Tian Dan does not yet know he has arrived.

And Li Yanyan also shooed everyone else away before revealing his identity. There must be some leeway for him to turn the situation around.

After heaving a big sigh, he reverted to his former easy and unrestrained manner and dully said, "Did she tell you any of the 'honey stories'?"

Li Yanyan nodded slightly and her face turned dark again, saying, "Xiang Shaolong! How audacious of you. This time

are you on orders from Qin to bewitch my Great Chu's vassal states?"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said, "I, Xiang Shaolong am not such a base and despicable person, plus I disdain to do these kind of things. If I want to fight, I will fight on the battlefield to show my real stuff. This time I came to assassinate Tian Dan. Now that my identity has been exposed by Empress Dowager, I have no choice but to return to Qin. The only request is to be able to lead Dian's orphan and widow away peacefully."

Li Yanyan almost losing her voice, said, "Is it so easy to leave?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and looked at her, first flashing around of his handsome sex appeal, then serenely said, "Whether you want to kill or maim, its all at your convenience. But if I am killed, and with Lord Chunshen's plot to send people to kill Xu Xian, even Lu Buwei will find it difficult to prevent the Qin army from crossing the border, leading to a disaster."

Li Yanyan was extremely angry and said, "This is being an intolerable bully. Do you think my Great Chu is really afraid of Qin? Qin is presently facing a revolt in the Eastern regions and is unable to look after itself. Would they really dare to invade my Great Chu?"

This speech was hard on the outside but soft on the inside. People with sharp eyes could all tell that she was afraid. It is no wonder. Whose countenance does not change nowadays



when talking about Qin?

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "Qin is certainly now busy with internal affairs. But what matter is the Eastern uprising? 'Soldiers arrive, calm restored'. 'Medicine arrives, illness cured'. On the contrary, it is Great Chu's issue with Dian that has caused the vassal states to have a change of mind, inciting popular confusion. Qin may not have the strength to conquer Chu right now, but as long as Qin is able to force Empress Dowager to move her capital once again, the consequences would be indescribable."

As the two of them stared at each other, Li Yanyan coldly said, "Just now you mentioned that Lord Chunshen has sent people to attacked Xu Xian's diplomatic delegation. What is this about?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly celebrated, knowing that the tide has turned, and he said with a deep voice, "This is actually a big conspiracy by Tian Dan and Lu Buwei to overturn Chu. Lord Chunshen thinks that killing Xu Xian will put him in Lu Buwei's good books, but in reality he has fallen into a trap."

He then related everything from beginning to end, especially the part about how Lu Buwei and Tian Dan colluded, at first seeming to include Li Yuan, but later showing their true plans, abandoning Li Yuan in favor of Lord Chunshen. He also took the chance to tell her about how he met Madam Zhuang in the Qinling mountains, and even elaborated in detail how Cheng Qi disguised as a boatman to murder them en route.

Li Yanyan's beautiful eyes got bigger and bigger, her countenance flitting between light to dark, appearing extremely shocked.

At last Xiang Shaolong said, "Empress Dowager should know by now that I truly have not the least bit of dishonorable intention towards Great Chu."

Li Yanyan said in annoyance, "Why is Lord Chunshen so muddle-headed, unexpectedly disregarding universal condemnation to murder the Qin diplomatic delegation that has come to offer condolences. I must prevent this from happening."

Xiang Shaolong said, "If it was possible, I would have done it already. Xu Xian is one of the core people in the Qin military. If something untoward happens and Lu Buwei leaks that it has been perpetrated by Lord Chunshen, then the only way to appease the fury of the Qin military is to offer up the head of Lord Chunshen. Then I could possibly make an attempt at exonerating Great Chu."

Li Yanyan was startled and said, "How can I do such a thing? Ai! Although I am the Empress Dowager, I still do not have the ability to behead Lord Chunshen so easily."

Xiang Shaolong knows that she has already been affected emotionally and softly said, "It can be done as long as Empress Dowager does not oppose it. I will think of a way with Imperial Uncle."

Li Yanyan blankly said, "Does Imperial Uncle know you are Xiang Shaolong?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head.

Li Yanyan clearly knew about the former happenings between the two of them and said with a deep voice, "Doesn't he hate you for stealing his love?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "At present, Brother Li can only choose between killing me and Chu's internal disorder plus the threat of the Qin army. In the end Brother Li loves his family and his country, and so he chose to collaborate with me!"

Li Yanyan contemplated this for a while then showed a tired look and said extremely tenderly, "General Wan, please withdraw. I need to have a good think."

Her feeble manner caused Xiang Shaolong to be extremely aroused. As he hurriedly suppressed his crooked thoughts, he left.

The moment he stepped out of the palace hall, he was immediately invited by Li Yuan to his alternate residence in the palace for a discussion.

After revealing his exposure by Li Yanyan, Li Yuan happily said, "This matter is wonderful. If younger sister stands on out side, our odds will increase greatly."

Xiang Shaolong purposely tested his sincerity, saying, "Empress Dowager's manner towards both you and Lord Chunshen appears special. Does she have some situation between the two of you?"

Li Yuan stared blankly for a while then gave a profound gasp, exposing a painful look, saying, "Even though Brother Xiang

has always been this Li's arch enemy, but no matter whether its me or Tian Dan, we both greatly admire Brother Xiang in our hearts, even finding glory in having a person such as you as our opponent. If this had been asked by someone else, I would have just beater around the bush and been done with it. But now I do not feel like concealing it from you, and even more am convinced that Brother Xiang will help our Li family preserve this secret."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank, knowing that his expectation was not far off.

Li Yanyan was really involved in an unnatural relationship. Li Yuan was silent for a long time before slowly saying, "When Yanyan was fourteen, she was already very beautiful. Dad, mom and me this elder brother all regarded her as a precious pearl. We never expected that it was not only outsiders that salivated at her charm, but there were even people within the clan who harbored wild and beastly desires."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock. It seems that he had wrongly guessed the relationship between Li Yuan and Li Yanyan. The incestuous person was someone else. But why then was Li Yanyan's attitude towards Li Yuan so odd?

Li Yuan said, "I do not wish to discuss the details. The matter happened when Yanyan was sixteen. This beast with a human face was Li Quan. Li Ling also had a hand in it. At that time Li Quan was the most powerful in the Li clan. We could only watch in silent fury. Dad and mom passed away in

hatred because of this. Yanyan also changed completely, totally unwilling to come into contact with men, hiding in the house all day long. She was only willing to see me this one person and she had an unusual unwillingness to part with me."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly puzzled and asked, "If this is the case, she should be dying to kill Li Quan, why does she then trust him so?"

Li Yuan grieved and said, "Because she also hates me!"

Xiang Shaolong looked at him in shock.

Li Yuan slapped his palm on the table and his eyes emitted a blaze of hatred, and gnashing his teeth, he said, "From that moment on, I determined to kill Li Quan and Li Ling by hook or by crook. Up till when she was twenty, Li Quan this person who is worse than a beast unexpectedly came repeatedly to demand for her. I was at a loss and was compelled to think of a plot, which is to give Yanyan to Lord Chunshen. If she became pregnant, we would have Lord Chunshen give her to the King. Brother Xiang should understand my meaning! Only this way will Li Quan not dare to touch Yanyan. And I could also obtain Lord Chunshen's favor and trust, and also had a chance to become the Imperial Uncle."

Xiang Shaolong stared at Li Yuan in a daze. Who would have thought that the situation would be so complex. Indeed, every family has its problems. At the same time, it could be seen that amongst the different countries, not only did the Chu clans hold the most power, they were also the most

incestuous.

Li Yuan said, "I spent ten days expositing to Yanyan before convincing her, and the main reason she agreed was for the good of Chu. This was because if the King had no sons, there would have been chaos after he died. But she had a condition, and that is that the father of this child had to be me. She was only willing to bear a child for me."

Xiang Shaolong's voice almost failed, saying, "What?"

Both Li Yuan's eyes turned red and with a depressed look, he unhurriedly said, "I pretended to agree to her request. When it was time to do the deed, I switched with a household warrior whose body shape was similar to mine. Its a pity that a hundred secrets are revealed with one carelessness, and she found out after. She was so angry that she killed the man with her protective dagger. The next day, she did not say a thing and followed me to Lord Chunshen's house. Since then she refused to speak to me. Only after she became Empress Dowager did she treat me a little better. She deliberately favored Li Quan to harm me. Only recently did I realize that she had an unbalanced mind. That is why I was so happy when I found out that she had taken an interest to you, hoping that she could return to normal."

Xiang Shaolong finally understood why Li Yuan and Li Quan were from the same clan but were crossing swords, and why Li Quan can act so arrogantly with powerful backing. There was actually such an unnatural and perverse relationship behind this.

Taking in a deep breath, he said, "Li Quan and the Empress Dowager, Hei! Do they still have...."

Li Yuan shook his head and said, "Definitely not. Yanyan deeply and painfully hated men after that incident, only willing to talk to me. Later how she managed to bewilder Lord Chunshen and the King until their bodies and souls were reversed, even I do not understand. I do not know why she is able to endure them."

Xiang Shaolong said, "She did it for you. This is the only way to prevent Li Quan from killing you."

Li Yuan's whole body shook dramatically and with one hand grabbing at Xiang Shaolong, said with a gasp, "Is this really so?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "It truly is so. That she is willing to ignore her pain and serve the two men is indeed because of revenge. But she knows that you are now Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's adversary, that is why she deliberately became close to Li Quan and distanced herself from you. Just looking at how she allowed you to stay within the palace, we can see that she intended to protect you."

Li Yuan said, "Then why doesn't she explain everything clearly to me?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "That is because she really still hates you. I discovered this subtle circumstance that day when I was secretly looking at the both of you from behind the screen."

After revealing everything, Li Yuan felt a lot more at peace, and nodded saying, "Brother Xiang's words make sense. Brother Xiang should now understand my sincerity in collaborating with you. As long as we are able to kill Lord Chunshen, Li Quan and Li Ling, I don't care about anything else."

At this point even Xiang Shaolong also feels like killing Li Quan and Li Ling these two people who were worse than beasts. He asked, "At this point, who is holding on to military power in Shouchun?"

Li Yuan resumed his calm and replied, "Shouchun's troops are mainly divided into the Outer City Guards, the Inner City Guards and the External Defense Army. Originally, the Outer City Guards and the Inner City Guards operate under Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's control. But with Qu Shiming's death, the Inner City Guards are now under the command of Lian Anting. Du Qui has been promoted to become the Royal Guard Captain. These two are both my men. That is why the Inner City Guards are safely in my hands. Who would have thought that Wu Zhan was so helpful."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Which side did Wu Zhan originally belong to?"

Li Yuan said, "Wu Zhan is only loyal to the Crown Prince (of Chu) and Yanyan. If we did not have him to maintain the present circumstances, younger sister would have fallen into Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's control long ago. Even I would not have been able to protect her. The Inner City soldiers



number approximately ten thousand. I will completely dismantle the remnants of Qu Shiming's clique. Only by protecting my sister and the Crown Prince (of Chu) do I have the capital to contend with them."

After a pause, he continued, "The Outer City soldiers number about thirty thousand and are responsible for the defense of the city and the four neighboring towns. The commander of the External Defense Army is precisely the ingrate Dou Jie. In those days, it was I who vigorously pushed for him to assume this key position. How would I know that when I returned from Handan, he had already thrown his lot in with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan. The External Defense Army is responsible for land and naval defense and also for building the Great Wall. Their soldiers number fifty thousand, and they have the greatest strength, if not I would have gotten rid of Li Quan long ago.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "How about Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's private strength?"

Li Yuan said, "Li Quan is nothing to fear. But Lord Chunshen's three sons Huang Zhan, Huang Hu and Huang Ba are dauntless and unrivaled military leaders, together with five thousand household warriors, nobody in Shouchun is more powerful than he is. I only have two thousand family warriors under me. We are not even comparable."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Now that Huang Hu has led three thousand men to murder Xu Xian, his strength is greatly reduced, so if we want to make a move it has to be within

these few days. Else once Huang Hu is back, Lord Chunshen will immediately deal with us."

Li Yuan heaved a sigh and said, "I have also considered this point, but once the Yelang King and Li Ling arrive, the entire situation would be different. They have close to two thousand men with them, including many experts. It seems that if the Dian King's Mansion wasn't guarded by the Royal Guards, and if Lord Chunshen didn't need to be so discreet with sister, Li Ling would have led men to invade the Dian King's Mansion long ago. Brother Xiang should also be careful."

Xiang Shaolong felt a big headache and asked, "Is it possible to win over Wu Zhan?"

Li Yuan replied, "I won't say that is impossible just yet. If Wu Zhan really stands on our side, it will turn the covert struggle into an open fight, it will only bring us harm and no gain. The best method is still to use a heavy and lightning fast strike to sweep away Lord Chunshen, Li Quan, Li Ling, Dou Jie and the rest, and then let sister clean up the pieces. I only regret that we do not have the strength to do this at present."

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and said, "The one who strikes first gains the initiative. The one who strikes after is dominated. Is Brother Li able to create a map of the Yelang King's Mansion for me? If feasible, I will go and kill Li Ling tonight avoiding complications from too much delay."

Li Yuan patted his shoulder and said, "This is easy. Brother Xiang should first return to the dian King's Mansion. I will

come look for you in a little while!"

As both men exited the side room door, they coincidentally ran into Guo Xiu'er. All three were startled at the same time.

Li Yuan still does not know that Guo Xiu'er has also seen through Xiang Shaolong's identity, and laughed, saying, "Xiu're, quickly come and pay your respects to General Wan. He is the Dian Princess's younger brother."

Guo Xiu'er did not dare to look at Xiang Shaolong and greeted him with her head bowed.

All sorts of feelings welled up in Xiang Shaolong's heart, and after a few polite sentences, he went back to the Dian King's Mansion under the escort of Li Yuan's men.

On the way, Guo Xiu'er's pretty and refined face flashed repeatedly in Xiang Shaolong's heart. Unexpectedly, after a few meetings in Handan, she kept him constantly in her mind.

The things that have happened after they reached Shouchun have completely exceeded their expectations. All he wanted to do originally was to kill Tian Dan and then leave Shouchun for Dian to fulfill his commitment to help the Madam Zhuang restore her country.

How was he to know that his identity would be exposed individually and at different times by Guo Xiu'er, Li Yuan and Li Yanyan, and deeply dragged into the Chu capital Shouchun's power struggle.

One of the reasons he is sincere about helping Li Yuan is to

help Guo Xiu'er.

This is because if Li Yuan collapses off the stage, Guo Xiu'er will suffer a miserable fate.

The other reason is the debt of righteousness. Li Quan and Li Ling these two men who are lower than beasts are really too vile. As for Lord Chunshen, putting aside the matter of Zhao, just his plot to murder Xu Xian is unforgivable.

The problem is that even with Li Yuan's men, they do not have the strength to deal with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan.

The only way is to compel Li Yanyan to stand on their side. Only by killing Li Ling and demonstrating their power can they sway her opinion.

He just couldn't believe that Li Yanyan wouldn't want to take revenge for the lifetime of disgrace and hatred that changed her entire character.

If not she would not have defended Li Yuan and the Zhuang family constantly in all areas.

By the time he arrived at this thought, he had reached the Dian King's Mansion.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and determined to assassinate Li Ling at the Yelang King's Mansion that night. If not, he might never get another chance.

## CHAPTER 6

## A Tragic Life

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

THE moment he stepped into the Mansion, Jing Shan welcomed him and reported, "Master Teng is here!"

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed at the unexpected good news and burst into the inner hall. Teng Yi was chatting with the two ladies Ji and Zhao.

Teng Yi jumped up with unbridled emotions and hugged him tightly.

After they sat down, Ji Yanran beamed, "It turns out that we

just missed Second Brother. Dan Quan and Wu Da took only two days on horseback to reach Second Brother Teng."

Teng Yi related, "We attacked Dan Chu's army seven times in succession, but was repelled each time. This person's strategic and tactical acumen is not to be belittled. Pu Bu and Xu Yiluan are now holding them back. I feared that Third Brother was short of men and therefore brought three hundred with me. They all disguised themselves as traders from the Wei border and entered the city in batches. They are the best of our elite special forces."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and said, "I was just fretting over how I would assassinate Li Ling, but now my worries are over. Second Brother should first select ten men and have them act as the Dian King's former subordinates who have come to look for their new Master. These men will take over the defense of the Dian King's Mansion."

Teng Yi promptly summoned Jing Shan and the recently-arrived Wu Da and Dan Quan and had them take care of the arrangements. Xiang Shaolong then proceeded to brief Teng Yi on all that had happened to that point. As Teng Yi found out that their arch enemy Li Yuan had become their comrade-in-arms, he could not help but bug his eyes in surprise. When Xiang Shaolong revealed that his cover had been blown by Li Yanyan, Zhao Zhi was so startled that she clung onto Ji Yanran's back.

Li Yuan arrived at this moment.

The three men retreated to the study room to strategise.

Li Yuan was energized and his confidence increased when he saw the reinforcements, especially since he knew that a mere two hundred of the Wu family's elite warriors had the power to overcome a thousand regular soldiers.

As they unfolded the map and began discussing their strategy, Lord Chunshen's messenger arrived with an invitation for Madam Zhuang, Zhuang Baoyi and Wan Ruiguang to attend a banquet at his residence.

The three of them furrowed their brows. Li Yuan dispatched a servant back to his house to see if he too been invited. He then said, "What a treacherous banquet. How should we deal with this?"

Xiang Shaolong asserted, "I am sure that Brother Li has also been invited. Lord Chunshen must have lost his patience after failing to assassinate me today, not to mention that Brother Li's power has surged with the demise of Qu Shiming. He intends to eliminate the both of us in one fell swoop."

Teng Yi grinned, "Then we should beat Lord Chunshen at his own game and eliminate him tonight."

Li Yuan noticed his casual demeanor and smiled saying, "But we cannot possibly bring several hundred men to the feast. It would also be unseemly if we refused to go. We have managed to maintain a veneer of civility up till now."

Xiang Shaolong opined, "We definitely need to attend this banquet. It will cover our sneak attack on the Yelang King's Mansion. How many true experts does Brother Li have under

him? They must be near the level of Yan Fu or Dong Luzi."

Li Yuan replied, "I can count on ten to twelve people."

Xiang Shaolong continued, "That is enough. I will add twelve of my men to yours. We will each bring twenty-four men. In addition, Brother Li should station men inside the mansion grounds to keep watch. They are to assault Lord Chunshen's residence the moment they see a signal rocket. We will fight a life and death battle with them."

Teng Yi queried, "Shouldn't we defend against a possible sneak attack by Li Ling's men on the Dian King's Mansion?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "What we actually fear is that he doesn't come! Here..... Hei! We'll have Yanran take charge. They will come but will not be able to leave because they underestimate our strength."

Teng Yi proposed, "I will take care of Li Ling's petty life. In my view, forty-eight people is still a little thin. It would be best to have another ten men look after the horses and carriages outside. If anything happens, everyone will meet outside. This will reduce our risks significantly."

Next he patted his sleeve and added, "Our concealed 'collapsible crossbows' will decide our victory."

This moment, Lou Wuxin came to report that Li Yuan had indeed received Lord Chunshen's invitation for the night's banquet.

The three men continued to discuss the details of the night's operation. Li Yuan also sought clarity on the 'collapsible



crossbow' function and usage before leaving together with Teng Yi.

Xiang Shaolong then went to look for Madam Zhuang. As he reached Madam Zhuang's Northern courtyard, Zhuang Kong came out to welcome him, saying, "Madam Qingxiu is in the inner hall reminiscing with Madam Zhuang."

Before he had finished speaking, the sound of jingling ornaments drifted over. With two servant girls opening the way, Madam Zhuang and another beautiful woman exited side by side. He couldn't make out Madam Qingxiu's appearance under her veil, but just with her slender build and her elegant footsteps, he could tell that she was a rare beauty. Dou Jie was actually very blessed. Why would he forsake her and fall for Cheng Suning's concubine only to regret after?

Xiang Shaolong and Zhuang Kong briskly stepped aside while expressing their greetings.

Madam Zhuang introduced, "Madam! This is my younger brother Wan Ruiguang."

Madam Qingxiu flashed Xiang Shaolong a glance through her veil and returning the courtesy, said, "General Wan, pleased to meet you!"

She did not utter another word but continued to walking and left accompanied by Madam Zhuang. Xiang Shaolong remained unperturbed despite her disregard. After all, no man could possibly expect every woman to fall for him.

After Madam Zhuang returned, she dragged Xiang Shaolong into the inner hall and closed the door behind them. With a heavy expression, she said, "Madam Qingxiu came to warn me that Lord Chunshen, Li Quan, Dou Jie, Cheng Suning, Li Ling and the Yelang King have made a pact to kill us and Li Yuan. Let us leave this minute!"

Xiang Shaolong knitted his eyebrows and queried, "Hasn't she separated from Dou Jie? How would she know about this matter?"

Madam Zhuang replied, "Her niece is Huang Zhan's wife. Huang Zhan has a loose tongue. He was raining curses on you and Li Yuan at his home and so leaked the secret."

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hand, embraced the gloomy Madam Zhuang and chuckled, saying, "Even if they did not make a move, I would have compelled them to."

He then outlined the situation regarding themselves and the enemy.

Madam Zhuang took in a deep breath and said "I see you already knew. In that case, should Baoyi and I go to the banquet tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Of course not. I'll just make up some excuse for Lord Chunshen. I am sure that he has already predicted this."

Madam Zhuang anxiously asked, "Are we at a big disadvantage manpower-wiser?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "We may have a lot less people than

they do, but combat power is another matter. My people are all trained in infiltration and guerrilla tactics. Once the Yelang King's Mansion is on fire, I can guarantee that Lord Chunshen and his party will be in chaos and won't know what to do. I am determined to lay down my cards with Lord Chunshen tonight. It would be a dream come true if I could seize this golden opportunity to kill Tian Dan at the same time."

Madam Zhuang snuggled into his embrace and said, "Shaolong! I am very thankful to you. But what does it mean to 'lay down my cards'?"

Xiang Shaolong explained and then continued, "I am only afraid that Lord Chunshen's real objective tonight is the two of you mother and son. It would then be difficult for us to strike because we would not have the excuse to use force. Our only consolation then is to kill Li Ling and the Yelang King."

Madam Zhuang giggled, "You're awfully relaxed. Li Ling and the Yelang King have many experts at their sides. Don't underestimate them!"

Xiang Shaolong saw that her bright and intelligent eyes were extremely alluring and leaned over to give her a kiss. He then boasted, "What experts haven't I seen before? The most formidable strategy is to catch the enemies unawares. Their attention should be focused on Li Yuan's family warriors. How would they know I have soldiers in ambush? Knowing oneself but not knowing the opponent, this is a military

commander's biggest fear. Madam please do not worry."

Madam Zhuang replied, "We mother and son have Xiang Shaolong to rely on, what do we have to fear? We are just concerned about you."

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was lovely and touching, and couldn't help giving her another heartfelt kiss before leaving to continue his preparations. Who could have guessed that they would be confronting the enemy openly so soon.

Seventy-two members of the elite special forces have arrived. They all infiltrated the Dian King's Mansion secretly by climbing walls and traversing trees.

Ji Yanran was excited with her heavy responsibilities, but was calm and collected in command. She first gathered Madam Zhuang and the women and children and then laid out a defense plan for each strategic position. Even the treetops were covered. Zhao Zhi naturally became her attendant and orderly.

At this moment Lou Wuxin came on Li Yuan's instruction to update Xiang Shaolong on the situation, "Lord Chunshen and Li Quan's informants have spread out across the city. They have established tight surveillance of the Ministers' residences and the Dian King's Mansion with the intent of preventing anyone from escaping. Instead, it is the Yelang King's Mansion that is undisturbed, with the doors shut and nobody going in and out. No unusual movements can be detected."

Xiang Shaolong pointed out, "'Nobody going in and out' is

unusual. This is also known as 'covering intentions makes one conspicuous'. They will definitely attack the Dian King's Mansion tonight. Only by borrowing a foreigner's hand can Lord Chunshen deny all responsibility in front of the Empress Dowager."

Lou Wuxin said, "Our informant in Lord Chunshen's residence says that there will not be any special attack tonight. Huang Zhan has nonetheless been boasting that he will compel you to fight him during the banquet and even said that he is aching to kill you. All my brothers and I are waiting for a good show tonight!" He then continued in a deep voice, "Huang Zhan is the best swordsman in Lord Chunshen's household. Killing him would be a big blow to Lord Chunshen."

Xiang Shaolong unenthusiastically said, "It is enough to cripple him or injure him seriously."

Lou Wuxin chortled and said, "Working for Master Xiang is certainly different." As he was going to continue, Jing Shan came to report, "The Empress Dowager has summoned Xiang Shaolong to the palace."

Xiang Shaolong was elated. Li Yanyan has finally been convinced.

The palace maid withdrew after reporting his name. Li Yanyan had her face behind a veil and was silent.

Xiang Shaolong, who was seated on her right, could only wallow in his own boredom.

This was a hall in a quiet and secluded courtyard in the Empress Dowager's palace. With the courtyard entrance closed, there was no trace of any other people. It almost seemed like they were the only two people in the whole universe. He could not help but pity Li Yanyan, recalling her humiliation at puberty, and now with a strained relationship with her brother and with Chu's turbulence, and finally having to put up a pretense with the enemy.

Even though she is now the Empress Dowager, there is no happiness in her life. One can feel her misery and pain just thinking about how she had to bend herself to serve Lord Chunshen and King Xiaolie these two decrepit old men. Now even with that in the past, she has to contend with powerful officials who conspire amongst themselves, borrowing the late King's name to force this weak woman to commit acts against her conscience. Thinking about this, he could not help but sigh deeply.

Li Yanyan coldly asked, "Why is Mister sighing?"

Xiang Shaolong could hear the wariness in her voice. He knew that her bitter experiences have made her particularly sensitive and so he could not deal with her like he did others. He softly said, "I don't usually meditate and listen to my surroundings, but I just noticed the sound of wind rustling the leaves in the courtyard. I found that it was constantly changing with infinite variations, pleasant to the ear like the sound of nature, something that I normally miss. I was awakened to the fact that beautiful (good) things are always around us, but because we're engrossed with other

things, we will miss them even if they're right in front of us."

Li Yanyan remained silent but her delicate body trembled lightly. Nonetheless her face was hidden by the veil so Xiang Shaolong could't see her reaction. A long while later, Li Yanyan whispered, "Imperial Uncle is my half-brother. We have the same father but different mothers. My father only had us two children. From the moment I was born, Imperial Uncle had always been very protective of me. I..... I remember when I was fourteen, we were attending a Li clan banquet. The Li Ling, who was then called the Li clan's Little Hegemon, ganged up with some others and took liberties with me. Elder Brother defended me and fought with them, one against more than ten. He was beaten black and blue, but steadfastly resisted. Only when the adults were alerted did they stop. He did not awaken until I had tended his injuries for seven days and seven nights."

Xiang Shaolong imagined their bitterness and hardship, and couldn't help praising their fortitude. He could also see that their 'sibling love and devotion' had its clear origins, and that their later tragedies had been seeded way back then. Li Yanyan continued as if she was in a dream, "Everyone in the Li clan looked down on my dad, leading us brother and sister to be bullied frequently. Thankfully Elder Brother was never discouraged, arising before dawn everyday to train his sword skills, train his horsemanship and archery, and to read widely and all manner of books. In my heart, there was nobody better than him in the word, and even less men more erudite and multi-talented than he was. "

Xiang Shaolong knew that she had just made a life-changing decision. She was actually raising all this to convince herself that it was the right decision. Even though it seemed as if she was speaking to Xiang Shaolong, she was actually repeating everything to herself. Li Yanyan gently let out a breath of air, causing her veil to flutter open a little. She continued gently, "Do you know why I am saying all these things to you?" Xiang Shaolong replied as gently, "Because Empress Dowager trusts that I, Xiang Shaolong, am not some despicable and petty cad who will reveal your secrets in gossip."

Li Yanyan said unhurriedly, "This is one reason. When Elder Brother came back from Handan he was dejected and depressed. I found out later from Guo Xiu'er that it was because he had lost to Dong Horse Fanatic. After I had ascertained the facts, I sent people to investigate the real Dong Horse Fanatic, only to find out that Elder Brother had really been duped by you. It was only after Elder Brother returned from Xianyang this time that I confirmed my conjecture, and informed Xiu'er. At that time I was very curious what kind of person Xiang Shaolong was. How was it that with only a trivial few hundred people, you were able to toy with world-class formidable people like Elder Brother and Tian Dan, and defeat them with them not even knowing how and why. Even people like Lu Buwei who had power to overturn the Qin court could not cope with you. I finally understand today."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly and said, "I was just lucky a



few times!"

Li Yanyan bowed her head and very lightly said, "Can you sit beside me?"

Xiang Shaolong tarried for a while before approaching her and sitting three feet from her on the right. Li Yanyan lowered her head and removed her veil, then looked up again. Only then did Xiang Shaolong realize that her beautiful face was covered in hot tears.

Xiang Shaolong's own emotions surged, and he exclaimed hoarsely, "Empress Dowager!"

Li Yanyan closed her eyes but her tears continued to stream down unbidden. Her voice continued to be calm, however, and she continued one word at a time, "Xiang Shaolong! Kill Li Quan, Li Ling and Lord Chunshen for me. They are all lower than beasts."

Xiang Shaolong replied in grief and determination, "Shaolong solemnly obeys Empress Dowager's decree!"

Li Yanyan opened her graceful eyes gradually. Her lovely yet pitiful expression looked like pear blossoms in the rain, causing Xiang Shaolong to lower his guard. He reached out his sleeve instinctively and gently wiped away the pearly teardrops that clung to her powdered face. Li Yanyan gave him free reign and did not move, seeming as if she did not notice.

As Xiang Shaolong drew back his sleeve, he said solemnly, "Empress Dowager may relax. I will protect Imperial Uncle

from any harm."

He couldn't help laughing at how preposterous the situation was. Those days in Handan, Li Yuan was one of the men he most wanted to kill. How could one imagine that he would now wholeheartedly battle side-by-side with him.

Li Yanyan's gentle eyes focused on his face. She said with her calmly and clearly, "Wu Zhan just reported that Dou Jie has made an unauthorized troop movement. A full division of soldiers have come upstream from the Huai River and are within ten miles of the city. Whats more, a fleet of twenty warships have been parked right beside Shouchun. This is clearly a threat to caution me against dealing with them. I have no choice but to endure this bitterly. If I did not have Wu Zhan maintaining the equilibrium, Elder Brother and I would have been finished long ago. Yet Elder Brother is still unaware of my difficulties."

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Besieging troops need to be double the size of the defending troops to present any threat. Attacking one's own royal city, and even more so if there is no legitimate cause, the army will be fragmented and disunited. Dou Jie appears strong, but he is actually weak. Empress Dowager does not have to worry about this."

Li Yanyan flashed him a look of mild annoyance and said, "It is easy for you to say. I fear that the situation in the inner city is unstable, and the Outer City Guards have also been fully deployed for external defense. The Royal Guards have also been pulled back to protect the palace. If Lord

Chunshen and his gang strike first and attack you, what should I do?"

Xiang Shaolong guffawed and, displaying an unmatched confidence, leisurely said, "Soldiers are valued for their proficiency, not their numbers. It is Li Quan and Li Ling and that 'distinguished' bunch who should be worried."

Li Yanyan gazed at him with steely eyes and said, "Xiang Shaolong! Have more of your men infiltrated Shouchun?"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled and said, "Empress Dowager, please forgive me for revealing the climax prematurely. By daybreak, Li Ling's spirit would have departed his body. Take it as a modicum of justice for the Empress Dowager."

Li Yanyan's body trembled dramatically and with an uptight voice, she said, "Did Elder Brother reveal my story? Why else would you say such a thing?"

Xiang Shaolong was not prepared for her sensitivity. Alarmed, he quickly tried to explain himself, saying, "Didn't Empress Dowager mention that Li Ling bullied the two of you, and even beat your Elder Brother so badly that he was unconscious for seven days and nights?"

Li Yanyan's upright posture was beginning to give way to the increasingly urgent heaves wrecking her body. Tears once again brimmed in her eyes as she stared blankly at Xiang Shaolong. All of a sudden, with a "Hua" sound, she started bawling and threw herself into Xiang Shaolong's bosom.

Xiang Shaolong gently held her violently convulsing body,

feeling the moist patch on his shoulder growing bigger and bigger. He felt her pain, knowing that her long suppressed grief and bitterness had finally burst through her restraint. He did not speak a word of comfort, but cradled her as if she was an infant. Of course there was no hint of eroticism in this.

His noble and sentimental heart was bursting with sympathy and tenderness towards her. At this point, he only wished that he could console this weak suffering woman who has had to display such a strong and unyielding front.

A long while later, Li Yanyan finally choked back her tears. With his help, she sat her lovely body up straight and wiped away her tears. With her head lowered daintily, she lightly said, "I shall await your good news tonight."

Xiang Shaolong stood up without a word and left quietly. His entire shoulder was drenched with her tears.

## CHAPTER 7

## The Treacherous Banquet

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

XIANG SHAOLONG and Li Yuan left a little earlier and met on a side street to exchange updates.

The two of them ensconced themselves in a horse carriage. Li Yuan asked, "What did Empress Dowager want of you?"

Xiang Shaolong warily peered out the window, and casually said, "Empress Dowager wanted me to kill Li Quan, Li Ling and Lord Chunshen."

Li Yuan's spirits rose, saying, "Did she really say that?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and said, "Why would I lie to you? Why does she hate Lord Chunshen so?"

Li Yuan sighed forlornly and said, "She hates all men who have sullied her body. This includes King Xiaolie."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Any updates on your end?"

Li Yuan replied, "It appears that Lord Chunshen merely intends to use a duel to deal damage to us. This is because the guests tonight include all the senior officials, foreign dignitaries and even some vassal lords themselves. No matter how reckless Lord Chunshen and Li Quan are, they will not dare to attack us openly with their hundreds of people."

Xiang Shaolong asked somberly, "Is the Yelang King in the guest list?"

Li Yuan replied, "I did not see his name. This does not mean he won't be there though. Lord Chunshen must know how easy it is for me get a copy of his guest list."

Xiang Shaolong said in a deadpan, "I intend to determine victory or defeat with Lord Chunshen and Li Quan at this banquet. We will not get another chance. If I am not mistaken, Lord Chunshun will rise in revolt tomorrow morning when Dou Jie's troops are in position. Attacking from within and without, they will use overwhelming force to subdue Shouchun. The Inner City Guards falling into your hands was a bitter blow to them. This banquet is meant to detain us along with the most influential people in Shouchun. Cut off from the outside, we will not be able to

make any countervailing moves. This gives them great tactical advantage."

Li Yuan frantically said, "But Lord Chunshen has three thousand family warriors while we have a mere sixty men. Worse, some of our men will be left out in the front lawn. If we start fighting, we would be lucky to escape with our lives. How would we be able to kill the enemy?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "To shoot a person first shoot the horse. To catch the thieves first catch the king (ringleader). Has Brother Li heard of these two sayings?"

Li Yuan repeated the words twice to himself before his eyes gleamed, demonstrating his understanding.

Xiang Shaolong said, "I almost forgot the crucial point. Is Tian Dan on the guest list?"

Li Yuan shook his head and said, "I was just coming to this. Tian Dan has vanished after having breakfast with Lord Chunshen this morning. I think he may have slipped away from Shouchun."

Xiang Shaolong's heart sank. He said vexedly, "If he did leave, he should have been spotted by the city guards. Why haven't you received any news?"

Li Yuan said in exasperation, "With Dou Jie making the arrangements, even Wu Zhan would have found it hard to investigate. It is a simple matter for them to sneak Tian Dan out of Shouchun under cover."

Xiang Shaolong said with determination, "With this, it is even

more important for us to make a move. The only way we can determine Tian Dan's whereabouts is to force it out of Lord Chunshen."

Li Yuan understood his intent. If Tian Dan is already on his way to Qi, Xiang Shaolong would need to settle the matter with Lord Chunshen as quickly as possible and then double up to give chase.

Heaving a sigh, he said, "Brother Xiang has neglected his own matters because of me. I am embarrassed. Ai! That said, our chances tonight are actually not high!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled while shaking his head, saying, "Know yourself and know your enemy, a hundred battles without defeat. I have another proposal. Brother Li might as well substitute all his personal guards for my men. As long as Lord Chunshen does not know that we are carrying crossbows, our chances will increase to seventy percent. This is known as lengthening oneself to shorten the enemy. Using the crossbow to defeat the sword; avoiding their strengths and attacking their weaknesses, using efficiency and speed to defeat the enemy's strength in numbers."

Li Yuan exclaimed, "Even if Sun Wu were to come back to life, he would find it difficult to defeat Brother Xiang's clever stratagems."

Xiang Shaolong chuckled in his heart. This is precisely the creed of the special forces, using the elite to defeat the ordinary. As long as they could grasp the enemy's weakest link, it would be like pinching a viper's throat. No matter



how formidable the enemy was, it could only submit and be captured.

After the two of them split up, Li Yuan entered the palace to report everything to Li Yanyan while Xiang Shaolong made his way to Lord Chunshen's banquet.

Entering the main gate, he reached the lawn of the residence which was large enough for a thousand drilling soldiers. It was presently filled with horses and carriages. The whole area was brightly lit.

The main residence was on built on a white stone terrace. It was surrounded by covered walkways which were connected to buildings on the left and right as well as the rear. The environment was elegant and refined, with ancient trees reaching to the skies.

Xiang Shaolong's heart was stirred.

The status of the Chu King with his subjects was clearly lower than that of the Qin King.

That year in the period before King Zhuangxiang's funeral, all forms of celebrations and festivities in Xianyang ceased. The people here were completely different. Just with this one observation, one could tell why Qin was always victorious over Chu.

Xiang Shaolong and his men dismounted. Six of the men were assigned to watch over the horses while the other twenty-four followed him towards the main residence.

It was common for big shots to bring ten family warriors to

banquets. Twenty-four is on the high side, but under the present circumstances, Lord Chunshun had no reason to object. Moreover, how could he be concerned with twenty-four men?

The steps leading up to the main residence were filled with Lord Chunshen's family warriors. Lord Chunshen was with his two sons Huang Zhan and Huang Ba welcoming the guests.

Xiang Shaolong walked towards the steps. When he was halfway there, a voice called out from behind him, "Ah! Please hold it!"

Xiang Shaolong halted in alarm and turned his head. Scrutinizing the face of the person who was hurrying up to him, he was surprised again.

It was Han Chuang. He had a puzzled look on his face, and he apologized with a dry cough, "My apologies, I mistook you for someone else."

It was obvious that Han Chuang had recognized him from his back profile, but could not be sure after seeing his face since his entire appearance had been greatly altered.

Xiang Shaolong chuckled and said, "Your servant is now Wan Ruiguang! How is Marquis?"

Han Chuang understood instantly and winked at him. He then turned around to greet the other dignitaries.

Xiang Shaolong felt warmth in his heart. This Han Chuang may be flawed, but he was true to his friends.

As he walked up the stone steps, the two-faced Lord Chunshen hastened over and greeted him, saying, "Welcome General Wan! This lord is extremely honored. Why isn't the Dian Princess and the little Crown Prince (of Dian) here?"

Xiang Shaolong observed the formalities, returned the greeting and said apologetically, "The little majesty is unwell. The Dian Princess has remained behind to look after him. Will the Lord please forgive me."

Lord Chunshen hurriedly said, "I'll dispatch people immediately to diagnose and treat the little Crown Prince (of Dian). Once the precious medicine arrives, the ailment will be cured."

Xiang Shaolong swept his eyes over Huang Zhan, Huang Ba and family warriors who were all glaring fiercely at him. He chuckled in his heart and thought, no matter how sharp your eyes are, you can never imagine that there is such a thing as a 'collapsible crossbow' that can be hidden in one's trouser legs. This the advantage of 'High Technology'.

He replied, "I appreciate the Lord's good intentions. The little majesty has just taken his medicine. If he is not better tomorrow, we'll trouble the lord to look into it!"

At that point, a family warrior led Xiang Shaolong into the large hall.

The hall was comparable to the King's palace hall. There were four immense wooden pillars on each side, holding up four majestic beams which in turn supported roof.

The host seat was on the Southern end facing the entrance. Three rows of banquet mats extended to the left and right. Roughly estimating, there were at least a hundred seats in all. The front row of mats were for the important guests while the row at the back of the room was set up for family warriors and followers.

At this point, more than half the guests had been seated. They were served by more than a hundred colorfully dressed servant girls who looked like butterflies. The atmosphere was lively and celebratory.

Xiang Shaolong glimpsed the Guo Kai whom he had not seen in a long time seated to the left of the host seat. After he had become the Premier in Zhao, this lord seemed to have been reborn, filled with spirit and vigor and being as pleased as punch. He was presently chatting with Lord Longyang who was seated beside him.

This moment, the ushering family warrior said, "Master Wan, please!"

Xiang Shaolong followed him to the fourth mat to the right of the host seat.

Jing Shan and the rest squeezed into the two mats behind him and sat down in orderly rows.

Lord Longyang who was reclined opposite him gave him a wink. Guo Kai looked over and sized him up, but evidently did not recognize him as Xiang Shaolong.

The hall was now noisy with a feel of excitement. The guests

were all taking advantage of the time before the start of the banquet to greet each other and exchange news. Nonetheless nobody seemed to show an interest in Xiang Shaolong. Only the envoys from the vassal states waved at him in greeting.

A servant girl approached to serve wine.

Xiang Shaolong took a look at her and noticed that she was extremely dark. She even had a small mole on her left cheek. Since her appearance was commonplace, he took no further interest. He turned to scrutinize the other guests.

Li Quan was just across from him. After giving him a disdainful glance, he continued talking to the Cheng Suning who was downwards of him. He did not give Xiang Shaolong a further glance, as if he was already a dead man that would no longer have any effect on him.

As Xiang Shaolong was sneering in his heart, a familiar sweet-sounding voice wafted into his ears, saying, "You devil! Once again dressing up to scam people."

Xiang Shaolong's body shook with epic excitement and he almost called out Shan Rou's name. As he was about to take a closer look at the servant girl in front of him, Shan Rou softly scolded him, "Don't look at me. There is a concealed exit to your rear which connects to the outside through a winding corridor. Be careful!"

She left once she finished speaking.

Seeing this dream stealing and soul bewitching female

confidante again, Xiang Shaolong's spirits surged. The whole world was now alive to him, filled with colour and warmth that he had thirsted for and waited for expectantly for a long time.

At the same time, he was alarmed.

From appearances, this large hall only had two side doors leading to narrow corridors connected to the side courtyards. Without Shan Rou's information, he wouldn't have known that there was a concealed exit at the rear. This was a formidable arrangement for Lord Chunshen. He almost wanted to go in to take a look.

He hurriedly waved Jing Shan over and told him the matter.

As Jing Shan retreated, Xiang Shaolong's heart filled with the beautiful image of Shan Rou.

This beauty was certainly versatile and capable, actually managing to infiltrate Lord Chunshen's household as a servant girl to for an opportunity to kill Tian Dan.

At this moment, Shan Rou came back serving food. She whispered, "There are lances hidden underneath the corridors outside."

She then turned away to serve another guest.

Xiang Shaolong let go of his worries. It appeared that the opponent did not dare to use crossbows for fear of missing the target and hitting the other guests instead.

At this point, the guests had mostly arrived. Xiang Shaolong

failed to recognize most of the guests being announced by the entrance official. He just knew that they were either rulers themselves or top ministers, an exceedingly distinguished crowd.

The four military commanders Dou Jie, Wu Zhan, Lian Anting and Du Gui were all absent. This was expected since even though Shouchun looked peaceful on the outside, it was wrecked with tension on the inside. Dou Jie's big army was now confronting both the Inner and Outer City Guards. It was presently a stalemate.

Qu Shiming's failed attack on Xiang Shaolong had given Lord Chunshen and Li Quan their largest setback. With the Inner City Guards falling under Li Yanyan and Li Yuan's control, the enemy was compelled to distract them with the present threat of danger.

This moment, the entrance official chanted, "The Qielan King arrives!"

Xiang Shaolong looked over at the entrance. The first thing he saw was the sheen of jade arms and beautiful legs.

Their owner was a youth filled with feral beauty and sex appeal.

This girl was dressed in clothes made from thin leather. Her beautiful hair hung to her eyebrows, and she had a smooth chest and bare arms. She was extremely alluring.

The most captivating thing was that as she looked around, she flashed her abundantly sweet smile and coquettish eyes,

instantly grabbing everyone's attention.

With great difficulty, Xiang Shaolong forced his attention to the Qielan King beside her. His head was crowned with a feathered crest and he wore a long robe. He was short and stout, with his facial features squeezed into the center of his face. He walked with an exaggerated swagger and was talking to the Lord Chunshen at his side.

All the bodyguards behind him were taller by at least half a head, their exposed arms thick and strong, creating a unique ethnic appearance.

As Lord Chunshen pointed him to his seat, Xiang Shaolong suspected that the Qielan King was asking after himself. Indeed the Qielan King's slender eyes looked over in his direction. Extricating himself from Lord Chunshen, he led his delegation over in large strides and sat down.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up to offer his greetings.

The Qielan King then laughed loudly from a distance, "Wan Ruiguang is worthy of being named the number one warrior of Southern Dian. Just arriving at Shouchun, you drove away the scoundrel who had the gall to occupy the Dian King's Mansion, to everyone's great satisfaction."

The other guests all pricked their ears and raised their brows at this open declaration of support.

Li Quan snorted loudly, expressing his dissatisfaction.

The Qielan King either did not hear or pretended not to. Without waiting for anyone, he came to the front row and



raised his right palm.

Xiang Shaolong had been instructed by Madam Zhuang earlier, and hurriedly raised his right palm and hi-fived him three times.

The Qielan King said to that captivating girl, "Caicai, come meet Hero Wan, Ha! This is my daughter Nuo Caicai. I brought her here this time to see the Great Chu's bustling scene."

Nuo Caicai greeted, her soul stealing eyes sending him an unforgettable ripple, and giggled before saying, "General Wan is really big and strong!"

These words instantly caused a murmur to break out. It was rare to see such a brazen and unrestrained girl being so forward with a man she had just met.

At this moment, Lord Chunshen hurried up and was about to lead the him to a mat on the right of the host seat when the Qielan King pointed to the mat ahead of Xiang Shaolong's and said, "I will take my seat here."

A look of displeasure flashed across Lord Chunshen's eyes, but he could not object.

Just as the bustle was resuming, the entrance official proclaimed, "The Yelang King arrives!"

The Qielan King leaned to one side with complete disregard to his bearing and spat out a glob of spittle with a "Pei" sound, expressing his distaste at hearing the Yelang King's name. He then led the scorchingly hot Qielan Princess Nuo

Caicai to the mat upwards of Xiang Shaolong, openly proclaiming that he was standing in unity with the Wan Ruiguang that Xiang Shaolong was playing.

Dispensing with propriety, he gave him several winks.

After the song courtesans had retreated, the Yelang King bellowed a long laugh, looked at Xiang Shaolong with his ferocious eyes, and raised his cup, saying, "I'll first toast General Wan a cup, then inquire on one matter. General Wan, please advise."

Xiang Shaolong exchanged a glance with Li Yuan, both knowing that the show was about to start. Nonetheless, they would let the enemy make the first move.

## CHAPTER 8

## Fight Behind Closed Doors

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

XIANG SHAOLONG did not make a move, and solemnly shouted, "I, Wan Ruiguang have never drank wine with my enemies. This toast can be dispensed with. Whatever matter the vassal lord<sup>4</sup> has, please raise it!"

The whole banquets hall quietened down. Everyone could feel the mutual hostility.

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<sup>4</sup> The word for 'vassal lord' (侯王) has been translated to Marquis in previous chapters. I am keeping the term vassal lord to distinguish the Kings of vassal states from the usual Marquis like Han Chuang.

The Qielan King gave a cold snort and glared furiously at the Yelang King.

As host, Lord Chunshen should have raised his voice to diffuse the situation, but he took it easy and looked on as if nothing was his concern.

Li Quan and Cheng Suning looked pleased with themselves, obviously knowing in advance that the Yelang King would cause trouble with Xiang Shaolong during the banquet.

That Yelang Prince Hua Qi glared at Xiang Shaolong with murderous intent.

The Yelang King nodded his head and shouted 'good!' twice before glaring sinisterly at Xiang Shaolong with his fierce eyes and said, "I heard that you Wan Ruiguang boasted in front of the Empress Dowager today that you wanted the Dian King Li Ling's life. This King felt puzzled after hearing that. Wan Ruiguang, you have but fifty men with you and may not even be able to protecting the women and children. I would like to know what ability you have such that you have the guts to spout such lunacy. Wan Ruiguang, can you explain yourself?"

This speech provoked a round of laughter from the Yelang people, Li Quan, Huang Zhan and the rest, demonstrating his ability to humiliate with his words.

As the laughter died down, the hall became deathly silent and filled with explosive charge.

Li Quan, Cheng Suning, Huang Zhan, Huang Ba and the other

core conspirators from the other camp could not help looking pleased with themselves.

Xiang Shaolong has seen enough of major events. He even disregards people like Lu Buwei, Tian Dan and such, so why would he fear a mere vassal lord who thinks too highly of himself. He pretended to be surprised and said, "The vassal lord loves to joke. The Dian King is presently in the Dian King's Mansion, neither did he change his name to some Li Ling. Has the vassal lord been muddled by the three cups of watered wine?"

The Yelang King was stumped for a moment. Just as he was about to speak, Li Yuan guffawed out loud and said, "Vassal lord Hua Ciwa not only made a mistake, he has also overstepped the authority the Great Chu allowed him by privately conferring titles and riches to traitors. What kind of relationship does the Yelang King have with this traitor who betrayed his sovereign?"

These words were even harder to refute.

While Li Lings seizure of the Dian King's seat was with the tacit consent of King Xiaolie, it was never openly acknowledged. At this point, even the scheming and foresighted Lord Chunshen found it difficult to intercede.

The Qielan King was the Yelang King's mortal enemy and took the chance to add fuel to fire, saying, "If one day, Hua Ciwa's position is usurped by someone else, I can also enjoy the pleasure of privately conferring titles on people."

The Yelang King flew into a shameful rage and said,

"Whoever is sitting on the Dian throne now is without doubt the ruler of Dian country. This is an incontestable fact. Only ignorant people will quibble over this obvious matter."

Everyone could tell that he was running out of arguments to justify himself.

Lord Longyang giggled delicately and said, "The vassal lord's words are lacking. It is said that if the name is not legitimate, the words will be untenable. Li Ling's name is indeed not legitimate, that is why the vassal lord's words are not tenable. These words are said by the former sages. Are you saying that the former sages are also ignorant?"

The moment these words were spoken, the whole floor except Xiang Shaolong was startled. This was because Lord Longyang represented the Wei King and his position was venerable. Whatever he said was Wei's position. For him to oppose Li Ling as the King of Dian is therefore a surprise.

Han Chuang also followed with a laugh and said, "What Lord Longyang said is reasonable. How can someone who murders his master in treason be treated as legitimate?"

Lord Chunshen and his party all looked at each other. Who would have thought that the Wei and Han representatives would both ridicule the Yelang King.

The ten bodyguards who came with the Yelang King all placed their hands on their sword hilts, looking like they wanted to bite people's heads off.

Guo Kai was completely baffled, not being able to figure out

why Lord Longyang and Han Chuang would want to help 'Wan Ruiguang'.

After Xiang Shaolong saw Shan Rou again, he body was charged with strength and his hand tingled with expectation. He sniggered, "At present this Wan only has the sword on his person and a few steadfast and loyal men, really nothing much to show. If the vassal lord is interested, wouldn't it be a lot simpler to send someone forward to verify my ability?"

Nobody could predict that he would turn the tables and take the initiative, openly inviting a fight. The hall was so silent that one could hear a pin drop. The loudest noise was the Yelang King's panting. He was evidently exploding with rage.

With a violent bark, the Third Prince Hua Qi sprang up from the Yelang King's mat. He carried a battle axe in each hand. He clashed the two axes together with a loud clang, then loudly declared, "The Yelang King's third son Hua Qi invites Wan Ruiguang to the arena for a contest."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly pleased and was just about to step out to deal a heavy blow to this kid. Who would know that the Jing Shan who was behind him was itching for a fight even more than he was. He dashed out and bowed, saying, "Your servant is Wan Shan. Would Master Wan please grant me permission to do battle?"

Xiang Shaolong was extremely pleased in his heart. Firstly, Jing Shan's combat ability was second only to Jing Jun, so he should have no problem with this kid.

Secondly, he wouldn't have to worry about arousing the

Qielan Princess Nuo Caicai's interest and having to entertain her tonight after killing the Yelang kid.

Nonetheless, he wasn't going to let Lord Chunshen off so easily. Smiling at him, he said, "The Lord should understand that this contest is not just some ordinary bout. It is easy for blood to be drawn and lives to be taken, spoiling the festive spirit and could even break into an all-out riot. If the Lord objects, I will not accept this challenge."

The Yelang King still mistook this for cowardice, and sniggered, saying, "Life and death is fated. If you Wan Ruiguang have the ability to touch a strand of my son's hair, I, Hua Ciwa will not quarrel endlessly over this."

How would Lord Chunshen ruin his grand plan for tonight just with two sentences from Xiang Shaolong? He chuckled and said, "Since the Third Prince has this interest, how could Huang Xie be the one to dampen the spirit? General Wan had better decide for himself."

Hua Qi hefted his axes and made a stance, seemingly unburdened by the weight of the axes, clearly an exceptionally strong man. He shouted explosively, "If you Wan Ruiguang kowtow and admit your mistake, we can let this matter drop."

Xiang Shaolong chortled and said, "Good!"

After signaling to Jing Shan to take his life, he said, "Swords and sabers are blind! Everybody please be careful!"

Jing Shan exulted and rushed forward with big stride. He



stood ten feet from Hua Qi with his sword still sheathed.

Huang Zhan suddenly stood up and shouted, "Wait!"

Everyone was startled and turned to him.

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to scan the floor to look for Shan Rou, only to find that all the servant girls had retreated to the back of the banquets hall and were standing with Lord Chunshen's family warriors. How could he spot this cunning and clever buddy in such a short time?

Huang Zhan's voice carried over, "If General Wan's side loses this bout, will he again send his underlings to die on his behalf?"

These two words were really overbearing and unreasonable. Even those who did now know what was going on could tell that Lord Chunshen and the Yelang King had joined hands to bully Xiang Shaolong.

Nonetheless, nobody dared to say anything. Only the Qielan King sneered and said, "This contest has yet to be decided, isn't Master Huang's words premature?"

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan looked at each other and laughed, the former lazily said, "What wise opinion does Master Huang have?"

Huang Zhan shouted harshly, "Shouldn't the next bout be between you and me?"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled, "Master, don't be so impatient. Its not to late to speak of this again after this bout. Begin the

fight!"

Hua Qi has lost his patience waiting. He bellowed a battle cry like thunder and raised both battle axes, looking extremely bold and powerful. He brandished his axes in a series of severe chops and hacks, and swept towards Jing Shan like a breaking wave flying into the sky. He was certainly an arrogant general who thought himself above all. Everyone was moved with his display. Even Li Yuan was worried for Jing Shan. Nuo Caicai was even more nervous, her hands clasping her chest.

Jing Shan was calm and fearless, and his sword flashed out like lightning, carrying with it the deadliness of a viper. His steady yet swift movements looked like rolling winds in the clouds. Jumping, leaning, hacking and thrusting, every move was aimed at the enemies openings and vulnerabilities. Together with his flashing speed and his graceful dancelike footwork, he seemed to be using nothing but a defense and counter-attack strategy.

The sound of clashing axes and swords rang without pause. Jing Shan periodically advanced and retreated. Hua Qi could not glean one bit of advantage.

The countenance of the Yelang people and Lord Chunshen changed instantly. They could not imagine that some random person from Xiang Shaolong's entourage could contend with Hua Qi, the number one warrior in Yelang. Moreover, his arm strength was clearly greater than Hua Qi's, how could they not fear and despair?

By this time, Hua Qi had exhausted his strength. Since his axes were heavy, he became momentarily sluggish. As he waned, Jing Shan waxed and his sword exploded forward, forcing Hua Qi back two steps.

Hua Qi was greatly embarrassed and rashly counter-attacked in a mad fury.

Jing Shan gave a long demonic laugh and moved forward like a flash of lightning. He unexpectedly raised his sword hilt towards the axe coming at his temple, blocking Hua Qi's most powerful right-handed axe attack. He then bent low, letting Hua Qi's left handed axe fly over his head. The sword in his hand moved as if electrified, shooting towards Hua Qi's stomach from an oblique angle.

Hua Qi was scared stiff and both axes flew from his hands while he suddenly retreated.

Jing Shan sheathed his sword and coldly watched Hua Qi retreating.

From the time the two men started fighting, the entire banquet floor was quiet without a whisper. This moment everyone focused on Hua Qi's body. They all knew that he had been injured seriously but just didn't know whether he was in mortal danger.

Hua Qi retreated another two steps before emitting a heart rending shriek and collapsing on the ground with a loud crash.

The Yelang King frantically stood up and yelled madly, "My

son!"

The Yelang people had already dashed out as a group to examine the Hua Qi lying on the ground. They couldn't help but see the fountains of blood gushing from his chest and stomach.

Jing Shan nonchalantly return to his mat. As he passed by Nuo Caicai, he reached out, hugged her and kissed her on the mouth before letting her go.

At this moment, Lord Chunshen, Huang Zhan and the rest all left their seats to take a look at Hua Qi.

The Yelang King suddenly let out an earth-shaking cry and stood up from Hua Qi's side. He pointed his finger at Xiang Shaolong and screamed, "Wan Ruiguang! This blood debt for killing my son, I shall demand from you ten million times."

Most of the people on the banquet floor looked disdainful. They all despised the fact that he had so quickly reneged on his earlier claim that life and death were fated and that he would not pursue any grudge.

Lord Chunshen personally pulled the Yelang King back to his banquet mat. Hua Qi's corpse was carried out the back door. The floor was still covered with blood, presenting a ghastly sight.

The festive atmosphere had naturally evaporated, but nobody blamed Xiang Shaolong because the whole matter was evidently the work of the Yelang King and Lord Chunshen. Everyone also knew that the best was yet to

come.

The Qielan King broke the tense and silent atmosphere with a loud laugh, saying, "That General Wan has such a divine subordinate is cause to celebrate. The General is sure to be able to accomplish your objective of reclaiming your land soon."

The Yelang King stared at the Qielan King with his blazing eyes, but was angered speechless.

Huang Zhan returned from the back of the hall and walked towards the center of the arena with his hand on his sword hilt. He soberly said, "Wan Ruiguang! It is now our turn."

Li Yuan asked in a puzzled tone, "This matter is truly puzzling. It is clearly a matter between Dian and Yelang. Why is Master Huang acting as if someone has killed your parents? My hand is also very itchy. Why don't I play along with you instead!"

Everyone including Lord Chunshun's countenance changed at these words. This meant that Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen are now openly at war.

Huang Zhan knew that his sword skills were still inferior to Li Yuan's. He could only bitterly endure this and coldly said, "This does not concern Premier Li. Wan Ruiguang! Are you going to send someone else to do your battle again?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled sardonically, saying, "Master Huang is blinded with anger and is not in shape for a duel. Moreover, as I have said before, I will not touch the young master

unless the Lord permits.

All the guests' attention naturally shifted to Lord Chunshen.

Lord Chunshen could only keep his bitterness to himself.

At this point, if he doesn't strike, everything will cease, but if he does strike, the situation will only come to an end when someone dies.

This Wan Ruiguang's underling was already so formidable. The man himself must be unfathomable.

The problem was that the Yelang King had already sacrificed a son. If he did not let Huang Zhan battle, how was he to account to the Yelang King?

He couldn't help regretting not springing his surprise attack earlier. If he used underhanded methods under the present circumstances, he will gain the ridicule of the whole world.

In reality, the ambush he arranged tonight was just a back-up, not necessarily to kill Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan on the spot. He only hoped to delay things till morning so that he can coordinate his assault with Dou Jie. If he killed Li Yuan just like that, it would be difficult for him to prevent Li Yanyan from mobilizing the Royal Guards in a counter-attack.

As he was frantically considering all this, Huang Zhan had already said, "Will dad please allow your son to go to battle!"

Lord Chunshen silently heaved a deep sigh and nodding his

head, said, "Be careful, son!"

The entire banquet floor perked up. The majority of the guests hoped to see Huang Zhan perish under Xiang Shaolong's sword.

This person has always relied on his father's protection, fearlessness rampaging through Shouchun, both hands reeking with blood. It was just that nobody could contain him!

Xiang Shaolong chortled and stood up. He moved outside the arena and patted his sword hilt lightly three times. This was the coded signal for his men to prepare their collapsible crossbows.

At the same time he said indifferently, "It would be the best for the Lord to withdraw his permission. Master Huang's heart is now filled with animosity and a murderous spirit. I would like to be merciful, but it will be difficult."

Everybody felt that his tone was boastful. Nonetheless just seeing his casual posture, they could see his world dominating might. Huang Zhan was a far cry compared to him, hence everybody also got the feeling that his tone was justified.

Huang Zhan did not wait for Lord Chunshen's reply and barked, "Who wants you to be merciful?"

Brandishing his sword, he ploughed forward in a mad dash.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has always relied on his prestige to go on a rampage, regarding no one. That is why

he deliberately provoked him to anger. He has now been suckered by Xiang Shaolong's ploy. He focused his mind and Blood Wave left its scabbard.

"Dang!"

The sound jolted the entire field.

Xiang Shaolong stood proudly with his precious sword. Huang Zhan staggered back unsteadily with his sword. He was actually forced into retreat just by Xiang Shaolong's one move.

Xiang Shaolong gave a long laugh, "Master Huang! How about stopping the fight now?"

Lord Chunshen stood up and shouted, "Son!"

The hands of Lord Chunshen's warriors who standing at the back all strayed to their sword hilts, greatly increasing the tension in the hall.

While everyone's eyes were focused on the arena, Jing Shan and his party used this golden opportunity to load their crossbows under the table.

All the banquet guests were stupefied.

Huang Zhan has always used his bravery and strength to gain the reputation of being Chu's number two swordsman after Li Yuan. Who would have known that he would be forced into such difficulty, cutting such a sorry figure after only one clash. Who would not be shocked?

At the side, Li Yuan was perceptive. He knew that Huang



Zhan's mind was clouded with violent rage. Xiang Shaolong's sword move was also sophisticated. He struck precisely when the opponent's equilibrium was the weakest. That was how he achieved this seemingly mystical result. It was also demonstrably clear that Xiang Shaolong's arm strength was greater than Huang Zhan's.

Huang Zhan had retreated up to twelve steps before he could stop. Who would have thought that Xiang Shaolong would repeat his words, "Master Huang! Let this matter go!"

How could Huang Zhan withdraw after such great humiliation? He violently screamed, "I will slaughter you!" He pounced forward again.

While the opponent was halfway there, Xiang Shaolong moved forward suddenly and with a rapid attacking move, mercilessly bore over, meeting strength with strength.

The sound of a girl cheering and clapping sounded out suddenly. It turned out to be Nuo Caicai solitarily doing a cheerleader's act.

Because this was not some casual fight, everyone was holding their breath and keeping quiet. Nuo Caicai's clapping and cheering was really jarring, but nobody had the interest to pay her any attention.

The clashing sound of metal on metal rang out continuously.

The two men swept past each other.

Xiang Shaolong stopped abruptly and still with his back to Huang Zhan, he sheathed his sword.

Huang Zhan rushed forward another five steps before emitting a heart rending and miserable shriek. His word fell to the ground and with his left hand clutching his right, he knelt down. At this moment everyone realized that his right hand had been cut off neatly at the wrist, and had fallen along with his sword.

Xiang Shaolong faced heavenwards and laughed, "Anyone who wants to kill me, this person shall serve as a warning."

Lord Chunshen screamed, "Wan Ruiguang!"

Xiang Shaolong said without turning his head, "I warned the Lord many times not to let your son enter battle. Its a pity that the Lord wanted to kill me too badly. You can only reap what you sow. Who can the Lord blame?"

The Yelang King suddenly stood up and barked, "Kill him!"

Lord Chunshen also yelled, "Every debt has its perpetrator. Everyone please remain at your tables."

He picked up his cup and hurled it against the floor. "Peng!"

The cup disintegrated.

The ten over men behind Lord Chunshen rushed forth like a tide. Seven of them remained by Lord Chunshen while the other eight rushed towards the center of the hall and helped Huang Zhan up.

The other family warriors rushed forth from all four sides of the banquet hall, forming a human wall to cut Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan off from the other guests while

surrounding them at the same time.

Lord Chunshen's family warriors who were originally behind the two men Xiang and Li retreated to the two sides instead. More than twenty of them went towards the Qielan King's banquet mat to dissuade them from getting involved.

The sound of swords leaving their scabbards sounded unceasingly.

Lord Chunshen laughed from behind the human wall and said, "Didn't expect this right? If you order your men to lay down their arms, maybe I will spare your wretched lives."

Li Yuan remained calmly seated on his mat. He did not seem to notice the gleaming swords surrounding him. Sneering, he said, "The Lord is really audacious. Aren't you afraid of injuring the guests accidentally? Are you thinking of mounting a rebellion?"

Xiang Shaolong stood tall with a peaceful look and laughed out loud, saying, "Huang Xie, you are gravely mistaken."

Lord Chunshen sniggered and said, "We shall see!"

With a "Peng Peng!" sound, all the doors were shut.

Xiang Shaolong saw Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and the rest grasping their sword hilts one after another. He announced, "Everyone, please do not get involved or stand up. I will settle this with Huang Xie. Make your move!"

At this moment, Jing Shan and the forty-eight men were all still seated on the banquet mats. They were all completely

expressionless, causing those who looked at them to feel a sense of chill.

Lord Chunshen yelled, "Attack!"

"Peng!"

The hidden door behind Jing shan and the rest opened. A few tens of men with lances came out and attacked towards Jing Shan and gang.

The guests could not imagine that Lord Chunshen would have this trick up his sleeves. Nuo Caicai was the first to exclaim hoarsely.

Only then did Jing Shan and the rest start moving.

The forty-eight men spread out like a fountain, rolling on the floor and springing up. Forty-eight flashes of light flew from their hands. It turned out to be flying daggers concealed in their hands.

In the midst of miserable cries, the incoming men were hit by the daggers and fell to the ground.

Only then did they use the crossbows. Flights of crossbow bolts flew out accurately and unerringly, causing the defenseless attackers coming in to fall down in rows. The attack melted like ice.

The forty-eight men rapidly loaded their bolts with lightning quick movements, firing ceaselessly. They not only drove those attacking from the hidden door back out, they also forced those family warriors already in the hall to the back,

protecting the rest of the banquet guests.

Before long, the ground was littered with enemies groaning in pain and lying their own blood. The situation was extremely wretched.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan rushed towards Lord Chunshen. The ten odd family warriors tried to block them.

Jing Shan, Wu Shu and the rest of the forty-eight men spread out across the banquet hall, commanding all the strategic positions, merely using the crossbows to shoot any enemy soldiers who dared to attack. All the guests remained completely still in their seats, not daring to budge, afraid to endanger themselves in the crossfire.

Li Yuan's sword stabbed into Huang Ba's chest in a lightning move. Just as he was kicking aside the corpse, Shan Rou's shriek carried over the milieu, "Everyone stop! If not I will slaughter Huang Xie."

Both sides looked towards Lord Chunshen only to discover that he had been forced to a corner by a servant girl. A sharp dagger was pressed against his neck. His face was ashen like a corpse.

The entire battle scene froze.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan simultaneously rushed over and shielded her from both sides.

Shan Rou sternly shouted, "Throw down your swords!"

All the family warriors looked at each other at a loss of what

to do. Huang Zhan was seriously wounded, Huang Ba had been killed. There was no one left to lead them.

The Yelang King madly yelled, "Kill them for me!"

When his men jumped up, two rows of crossbow bolts had already flown towards them. Including the Yelang King, the ten over people were all struck dead.

Nobody else dared to move an inch.

Shan Rou yelled again, "Still haven't abandoned your swords?!"

It was not clear who started first, but with a sonorous 'Keng Qiang' sound, the ground was covered in discarded swords in an instant.

Jing Shan and the rest forced all the family warriors to the area behind Lord Chunshen's host seat. Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan forced Lord Chunshen towards the side of the main entrance.

Li Quan and Cheng Suning were seized and trussed up together with Lord Chunshen.

The special forces soldiers demonstrated a high level of efficiency, some advancing and some retreating, every movement was tidy and orderly, with no confusion at all.

Everyone could only stare mutely at this unimaginable outcome.

Li Yuan leaned over to Xiang Shaolong's ear and intimated, "Only now do I understand what is meant by 'To capture the

thieves, first capture the king (ringleader)'. I submit to Brother Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong chuckled to himself and turned towards the one and only unique woman Shan Rou who was staring straight back at him. He laughed, saying, "Elder sister is formidable."

The lovely Shan Rou snorted at him, immensely proud of herself.

Lord Chunshen asked in a trembling voice, "What do you intend to do?"

Xiang Shaolong greeted the floor of quests and said, "I, Wan Ruiguang, am deeply sorry for causing everyone some false alarm. All the esteemed guests may leave. Nonetheless, please wait for a short while and allow us to open a route for you."

Before he had finished speaking, the sound of slaughter could be heard outside the hall. It was a while before the noise died down again. Everyone's countenance changed.

A knock on the door transmitted a coded signal. Wu Yan who was in charge of the door flung it open. Lou Wuxin rushed in and said, "I have not failed my mission!"

Li Yuan laughed and said, "Everyone may leave now. We will secure the area for you."

He exultantly looked at Xiang Shaolong. Both knew that victory was in their grasp tonight.





## CHAPTER 9

## The Villain Is Taught A Lesson

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

AFTER Xiang Shaolong and his party dragged away Lord Chunshen's gang of three, the remaining family warriors within Lord Chunshen's residence gushed out in full strength. Who would have known that the moment they stepped onto the street, they were ambushed by Li Yuan's family warriors hiding with bows on the rooftops on either side of the street. Men fell and horses collapsed. They were utterly defeated.

Next, under Lou Wuxin, Dong Luzi's and the rest's command,

hundreds more of Li Yuan's family warriors rushed out from the buildings at the side. They carried lances, charging at Lord Chunshen's frightened family warriors in waves. Even though the enemy had twice the number of men as they had, they were without a head. Their morale was low, and all dispersed and fled in the face of the assault.

Lou Wuxin and the rest pressed home the advantage and attacked towards Lord Chunshen's residence.

They had been given strict orders not to massacre women and children, and also those who surrendered.

This moment, the Yelang King's Mansion was ablaze with flames reaching to the sky. Billows of thick smoke rose up into the clear night sky.

Of the ten buildings, four were on fire. The ear-splitting cry of murder sounded unceasingly.

The battle at the Dian King's Mansion had ended a short while ago.

The attacker's were Li Ling's hundred plus followers. They had climbed the high walls on the left and right to get into the mansion. They had thought that they could gain an easy victory. How could they expect that arrows would fly in like rain from all four directions. Half of them were felled in the blink of an eye. The rest who had managed to enter the mansion ran straight into the elite soldiers led by Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi.

They could not even escape with their lives, much less to kill

and burn.

Under Li Yanyan's orders, Du Gui secured the palace. The newly promoted Inner City Official Lian Anting had also sealed off the Inner City and set up inspection checkpoints on the streets. At the same time, he also safeguarded the foreign embassies and diplomats. Everything was orderly and tidy. Even though they did not participate directly in the struggle, they prevented other parties from interfering.

The Yelang King's Mansion was surrounded by Li Yuan and Xiang Shaolong's allied troops in a watertight encirclement. All who tried to come out were chased back in with powerful arrow shots.

The allied soldiers all had a red sash on their helmets to distinguish themselves.

Even though the Inner City had been plunged into a wild and noisy battle, the Outer City was completely undisturbed. Wu Zhan had also received orders from Li Yanyan not to get involved in the Inner City affairs.

Dou Jie and his large army outside the city were cut off from all news from within the city. He even thought that the fire was from the Dian King's Mansion that Li Ling's men had besieged.

Lord Chunshen's gang of three were kept prisoner on separate horse carriages under the close watch of the guardians.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan, these two war comrades with a

complicated relationship, stood shoulder to shoulder outside the Yelang King's Mansion, observing the situation.

The battle cry sounded.

Close to a thousand of Li Yuan's family warriors carrying shields split into two groups, forcing entrance into the front and rear gates of the Yelang King's Mansion. An even more intense round of battle cries and killing sounds rose up.

This round of battle concluded quickly. Teng Yi's imposing body appeared at the mansion gate. At his back, Wu Guang and the rest led a bound man out. They came straight towards Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan and pushed the bound man to the ground.

Wu Guang rushed forwards in big strides and grabbing his hair, raised his face while forcing him to kneel.

Under the light of the torches, they could see that even though the man's expression was now twisted, his facial features were actually well proportioned, sanctimonious and dignified. Who would have known that in reality, from the time he was young, he had never been a good person.

Li Yuan's two eyes gleamed and he chortled saying, "Li Ling old chap, how have you been!"

"Peng!"

Li Yuan kicked him in the lower abdomen, causing so much pain that he curled up.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that Li Yuan would beat him to

death right there and hollered, "Tie him up and put him into a carriage. We shall return to the Dian King's Mansion."

Teng Yi came to his side and said, "These Yelang people and Li Ling's Dian soldiers are all good-for-nothing. There was hardly any special defensive arrangements in the mansion. They could not even resist our crossbow and fire arrow attacks for a short while. Only ten of our men sustained light injuries."

Xiang Shaolong mused that these elite soldiers of his were as good as twenty-first Century special forces. They had all been trained in his modern methods and were best able to demonstrate their efficiency and power in city warfare. The Yelang King and Li Ling's men underestimated the enemy and did not prepare for defense. Moreover they had come from afar and had yet to have a proper rest. How could they present any real opposition with their tired men and horses?

This demonstrates the critical factors 'heavenly timing, favorable location and ready people' needed for one to achieve victory in battle.

This moment, Li Yuan walked over and patted both men's shoulders, saying, "This business tonight, I, Li Yuan will engrave deep within my heart. No matter what happens between Qin and Chu in the future, I will still be a friend to the both of you."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "It is unlikely that I and Brother Li will meet in the field of battle. Moreover, I intend to retire in seclusion at the earliest opportunity. Brother Li does not

have to worry."

Li Yuan was stupefied and wanted to question further when Lou Wuxin and a group of family warriors approached riding fast. They called out, "We can't find Tian Dan. It is said that he left Shouchun this morning. We need to interrogate Lord Chunshen on this."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a glance. Even though they had known that the outcome was likely to be thus, they nonetheless couldn't help but be disappointed.

Li Yuan opined, "Dan Chu and the rest have yet to arrive. He should not have returned to Qi. Ai, it is nonetheless hard to say."

Lou Wuxin suggested, "The Inner City is under control. It is now time to round up the clique of traitors."

As Li Yuan was about to agree, he was dragged aside by Xiang Shaolong who earnestly requested, "Can Brother Li limit his reprisal to Lord Chunshen and his few collaborators? From the beginning, taking revenge to settle a grudge has never been the best solution."

Li Yuan dithered for a while before nodding and said, "If I can't even do such a simple thing, how can I repay Brother Xiang's grace? We'll do it Brother Xiang's way!"

He instructed Lou Wuxin, "Help me inform all the high-ranking military officers in the Inner City, this incident was the result of the three men Lord Chunshen, Li Quan and Cheng Suning's rebellion. Besides these three men's direct

male relatives, all the woman may return to their mother's houses. Servants and maids may be placed under alternative employ."

Lou Wuxin was extremely startled and displayed a puzzled look. He only proceeded to execute the order after a long pause.

The fire at the Yelang King's Mansion had been extinguished. The Inner City had been restored to peacefulness and tranquility. Only the sound of marching troops reminded the people in the city of the issue at hand.

"Pa La!"

Madam Zhuang raised her hand and twice slapped the Li Ling who was kneeling on the street, pointing her finger and berating him.

Li Ling knew that his power was gone, and remained silent in his disappointment. He looked like a defeated rooster.

You Cui and You Ning rushed forward with faces full of hot tears and joined Madam Zhuang in the abuse.

Zhuang Kong and the rest also cried tears of excitement when they saw that the villain had been captured and that their little Prince's restoration was at hand.

The impossible had become reality.

Shan Rou had arrived earlier and was with Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi in an extremely warm-hearted embrace.

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's return, they dragged him into the

inner hall to chat.

Lord Chunshen's gang of three were imprisoned separately awaiting action.

After sitting down in the inner hall, Shan Rou blissfully said to Xiang Shaolong, "At least you have a bit of conscience. In the end you were willing to come and deal with the big villain Tian Dan."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "How did you end up in Lord Chunshen's residence?"

Zhao Zhi delightedly replied on her behalf, "Sister Rou has always been pursuing Tian Dan. She guessed that he would need to pass through Shouchun on the way back to Qi from Xianyang. She also knew that he and Lord Chunshen were collaborators, so she sold herself as a servant girl and came to Lord Chunshen's residence."

Xiang Shaolong said in puzzlement, "Where has Tian Dan disappeared off to?"

Shan Rou replied, "He is going to meet up with Dan Chu. It has been reported that he is on a boat on the Huai River heading East. I was just fretting at how to handle this matter. Thankfully you have arrived."

Teng Yi entered and said, "We have discovered Tian Dan's whereabouts. He left the city secretly this morning. He is on a boat to Chengyang to meet up with Dan Chu's battered army. He will take at least a fortnight to reach Qi. We have enough time to prepare."



At this point, Wu Guang's stuck his big head out from behind Teng Yi's shoulder and announced, "The Empress Dowager is in the outer hall awaiting Master Xiang!"

Li Yanyan's face was covered by a heavy veil. She was covered in a maroon cloak and was standing and looking at the bright moon in the night sky outside the window. It was hard to determine her intentions.

The Royal Guard Captain Du Gui and the hundred plus guards had been ordered to remain outside the room.

Xiang Shaolong knew that she was filled with conflicting emotions and did not disturb her. He stood quietly at one side.

At this moment, Jing Shan and the rest dragged the two men Li Ling and Li Quan into the hall and forced them to kneel on the ground.

As Li Quan saw Li Yanyan, he thought she here to save him and wailing, he said, "Empress Dowager please arbitrate on the old official's behalf....."

Li Yanyan coldly shouted, "Shut up!"

Li Quan wanted to speak further, but was boxed in the mouth by Wu Shu. Two incisors broke immediately and he was rendered speechless.

Li Yanyan softly said, "Besides General Wan, everyone else please withdraw."

Jing Shan and the rest looked at Xiang Shaolong and saw him

make the hand signal for them to obey. They then let go of the two men and went outside the hall.

Li Yanyan's plaintive voice arose like a dream, saying, "Do you two remember the incident five years ago?"

Li Quan and Li Ling exchanged a look, both showing fear and surprise.

Li Yanyan slowly turned her body and uncovered her veil, exposing her magnificent and elegant face. Her eyes were nonetheless cold as ice, shooting forth a piercing hatred.

Li Quan lisped through his blood-filled mouth and softly said, "Yanyan, don't forget that I am your uncle. I have always loved you dearly....."

Li Yanyan shook her head and said, "It is precisely because one is my uncle and one is my cousin that all my life I can't forget your beastly conduct. If it was an outsider, I might have been able to endure it. I leveraged my own body just for this day. Li Quan, get your ass here."

Li Quan was terror stricken and repeatedly kowtowed and said, "Empress Dowager please spare my life!"

With a "Pei!" sound, Li Ling spat a glob of spittle, and said in contempt, "What Empress Dowager, you were even ridden by me Li Ling....."

"Peng!"

Xiang Shaolong's leg flew out and hit him square in the face. Li Ling fell face up on the ground and could not speak

anymore.

Li Yanyan flashed Xiang Shaolong a grateful look and slowly walked over to Li Quan.

Li Quan knew something was wrong and looked up in shock. Li Yanyan raised her sleeve, exposing her powdered and tender arm with a gleaming sharp poisoned dagger. Quick as lightning, she thrust the dagger into Li Quan's stomach.

Li Quan gave a miserable scream and fell to the ground dead along with the dagger.

Li Yanyan turned around and threw herself into Xiang Shaolong's bosom. She panted rapidly but did not let out any tears.

When she had calmed down a little, Li Yanyan left Xiang Shaolong's embrace and requested, "Can you kill Li Ling for me?"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said, "I am not used to killing people who are defenseless. Allow me to find someone else to do it, ok?...."

Li Yanyan looked at him deeply, hanged her head and said, "You are truly a good man. Alright!"

She then returned to the window and turned her beautiful back towards him.

Xiang Shaolong gave the Li Ling who was groaning on the ground a look and thought, this person had committed all sorts of evil deeds, certainly death was too good for him. He

opened the door and was about to call for people when Li Yuan and Madam Zhuang arrived together.

Xiang Shaolong did not wish to let them know that Li Yanyan killed Li Quan herself, and so whispered, "Empress Dowager is in a bad mood. Let us not disturb her. Li Quan is gone. I'll leave Li Ling to you guys!"

Li Yanyan appeared behind Xiang Shaolong with her phoenix coronet and veil replaced and firmly said, "No, I want to see him executed with my own eyes!"

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner residence, it was just past the fourth night watch. Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou were all in high spirits relating all the happenings to each other. Shan Rou had removed her disguise and returned to her regular appearance.

Xiang Shaolong felt like he had moved from one universe to another, leaving behind the vengeful struggle that he had loathed but could not avoid, and arriving in this gentle and sweet little world of his.

What he sought after here was not carnal satisfaction, but spiritual peace and quiet. His needs were especially pronounced after the night of blood and gore. His mind and body were both exhausted. This was the price of survival and protecting his loved ones after all.

The three ladies' eyes flitted over to him in unison.

Shan Rou still looks like she is dissatisfied with something. She squinted at him with her intelligent eyes and leaned on

him, her appearance as mesmerizing as ever.

Xiang Shaolong sat beside Shan Rou. Before he could say a word, Shan Rou raised a finger and pressed it on his lips, solemnly saying, "Don't ask me about what has happened. If you wish to know, please asked the two of them. I will not repeat what I have just said again."

The feeling of familiar warmth and comradeship welled up in Xiang Shaolong. He laughed without speaking.

Shan Rou removed her finger and suddenly kissed him on the lips before smiling enchantingly, saying, "I have really missed you. I think of you at least once a month."

After teasing Xiang Shaolong, she giggled together with Zhao Zhi.

Ji Yanran gently asked, "How is the situation outside?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "We are just waiting for Dou Jie to report to the royal court tomorrow. Li Yuan has sent a man that Dou Jie trusts to tell him that Li Yuan and I have been killed by Lord Chunshen. We hope to swindle him into entering the city without precautions."

Ji Yanran elucidated, "It is difficult for Dou Jie to clap with only one hand, what can he accomplish? How could the King's city be so easily breached? His subordinates would not have been willing to follow him in staking their lives and families in this one risky gamble. All of them have clansmen or relatives living in the Inner City."

Xiang Shaolong lay down on her mat and sighed, saying, "So

comfortable!"

Zhao Zhi said, "Night has fallen. Hubby should take a bath and rest. Let Sister Rou accompany you tonight."

Shan Rou was greatly embarrassed and jumped up saying, "Who does he think he is? Who said anything about accompanying him?"

Xiang Shaolong's childish spirit was provoked and exerted himself to get up, saying, "Do you think you are calling the shots?"

Shan Rou gave a shriek and ran into the inner hall.

Xiang Shaolong had just shut his eyes for a while before he had to leave the Shan Rou whose body had bewitched him upside down the last night. He hurried along with Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi to attend the morning court session.

Li Yuan was wearing his court dress and was waiting for them outside the palace gate under the protection of a large group of bodyguards.

After the customary greetings, Li Yuan allowed Madam Zhuang and her son to proceed first before riding in with Xiang Shaolong. He said excitedly, "Dou Jie fell into our trap. The moment he entered the city, he was seized by Wu Zhan. Wu zhan has now assumed command of the External Defense Army and has left the city to receive the troops."

They did not have many words before they reached the entrance of the main palace hall.

The four of them entered together. The three conspirators Lord Chunshen, Dou Jie and Cheng Suning were trussed up together and kneeling at the feet of Li Yanyan who was sitting high on the imperial dais.

Most of the officials present had attended the last night's banquet and therefore knew of Lord Chunshen's intent to kill Li Yuan and Wan Ruiguang. They also knew that Shouchun was now under the control of Li Yuan. Who would dare to plead on behalf of the three of them?

Li Yanyan had the three men's charges read to them. Lord Chunshen was not only guilty of attempting to murder the Imperial Uncle and remaining members of the Zhuang family, he was also guilty of inciting his son Huang Hu to lead men in an attack on Xu Xian. When this matter was reveal, it caused an uproar.

Dou Jie was guilty of moving army troops without approval and with the intent of revolt. Cheng Suning was guilty of being an accomplice.

Immediately after the charges had been read, all three men were led out of the hall and beheaded.

Following that, Li Yanyan proclaimed Li Yuan as the Right Premier and also announced a few more appointment changes.

Finally, she re-affirmed Zhuang Baoyi as the Dian Crown Prince and ordered troops to be sent to assist the mother and son to restore their country.

After the court was dismissed, Li Yanyan summoned Madam Zhuang and her son. Li Yuan was extremely busy himself. Xiang Shaolong was completely idle from head to toe and took the opportunity to take an incognito tour with the three ladies Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou, feasting their eyes on Shouchun's famously beautiful scenery. Teng Yi left to prepare their offensive against Tian Dan.

At dusk, the four of them finally returned to the mansion after having had their fun. The moment they stepped into the mansion, they knew something was wrong.

Li Yuan, Lord Longyang and Han Chuang had all arrived. The all had serious expressions, looking as if they were facing imminent calamity.

An intensely ominous feeling well up in Xiang Shaolong and he asked somberly, "Has Xu Xian met with a mishap?"

Li Yuan nodded and replied, "Not only has Xu Xian met with a mishap, it turns out that Tian Dan has fooled even Lord Chunshen. He is secretly returning to Qi via a land route."

Lord Longyang said, "He was afraid of getting embroiled in this latest massacre and therefore slipped away before anyone else."

Shan Rou bellowed out, "Pursue quickly. I know how to intercept him."

Xiang Shaolong collapsed down on his mat in extreme disappointment. Thinking about Xu Xian's indomitable character and his cheerful appearance, he could not help but



shed tears.

Unexpectedly they had been dealt another blow by Lu Buwei. The hard-fought balance of power in Xianyang had been destroyed all at once.

CHAPTER 10  
Numerous Difficulties And Dangers  
[Translated by YEONGWEE]

UNDER the You sisters' miraculous hands, Xiang Shaolong saw his restored appearance reflected in the bronze mirror.

The two ladies were filled with the sorrow at the thought of parting, and could no longer banter with him as usual.

Xiang Shaolong was also a mass of worry due to the matter about Xu Xian.

Huang Hu had related the account himself. He had been captured by Li Yuan at the city gate just as he was returning

from the mission. Three thousand men had departed but only seven hundred returned. The battle must have been intense.

Under torture, Huang Hu revealed that one of Lu Buwei's spies had been concealed amongst Xu Xian's five hundred attendants. That was how they were able mount a precise ambush in a valley near the Wei border. Huang Hu personally shot the fatal arrow. Under the Qin soldiers' death defying counter-attack, Huang Hu suffered many casualties and beat a hasty retreat. Some of his men were even captured. That was why Li Yuan was so vexed. Lord Longyang also feared that Lu Buwei would use the fact that the incident had happened in Wei as an excuse to mobilize an attack against them.

Tracing to the bottom of the matter, the ringleaders had always been Tian Dan and Lu Buwei.

The most hateful was Tian Dan's deliberate stirring of conflict, hoping to profit from the turbulence.

After Xiang Shaolong had heard the whole account though, his spirits rose as it was actually unknown whether Xu Xian was really dead.

Nonetheless he had determined to set out at dawn to hunt down and kill Tian Dan.

Tian Dan had left Shouchun only with slightly more than a hundred close followers. To avoid Chu's customs checkpoints, he had to take a roundabout route. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong had the assistance of the Chu

people and could take shortcuts. That is why even though they lagged by two days, they had a very good chance of intercepting Tian Dan before he crossed the Qi border.

As he rose to leave, the You sisters couldn't help throwing themselves into his embrace. They only sent him out tearfully after repeatedly imploring him to visit Dian whenever he had the chance.

Madam Zhuang intercepted him outside the door and pulled him into a room. Only after a lingering kiss did she say plaintively, "After tonight's separation, we may never have the chance to meet again. Shaolong ah, why is your feeling for me so ephemeral? I wish to serve you on the mat, but never got the chance!"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said, "The way things developed was beyond all our expectations. Madam need not be so broken-hearted, however. Perchance I will be able to steal some time off in the future to come and visit you folks."

Madam Zhuang rejoiced and said, "The gentlemen has spoken!"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "The fast horse is whipped!"

He reached out his hand and teased her chin. As he gave her a sorrowful kiss, gentle feelings welled up from the bottom of his heart and he softly said, "Don't cry. You should be laughing instead. Take care of Baoyi. I believe that we will meet again someday."

Madam Zhuang replied, "I will be returning to Dian the day after tomorrow. If you visit us on your way back to Qin, I will laugh for your pleasure."

After sharing hardship for such a long period, he would be lying to himself if he said he hadn't developed feelings. Although he was in a hurry to kill Tian Dan and return to Qin, under the present circumstances, he could not refuse.

Only after another round of intimacy did Xiang Shaolong extricate himself and leave the room. Everyone in his party was packed and ready to go. Li Yuan was talking to Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Teng Yi. Seeing him arrive, he pulled him aside and said, "I just saw Yanran. My heart is actually comforted. Indeed it is only you who are a match for her. I am too eager to pursue fame and fortune, power and influence."

Xiang Shaolong silently faced him and patted his shoulder, saying, "I was just a little bit luckier. If Brother Li had met her earlier... in reality she has always admired you."

Li Yuan sighed and said, "Just based on vision and aspirations, I am already unable to match you. Hei, Xiu'er wants me to wish you a pleasant journey."

Xiang Shaolong thought about Guo Xiu'er and his heart became sorrowful.

At this moment, Teng Yi came to hurry them, saying, "We need to set off!"

Everyone left together and mounted their war-horses. Ji

Yanran and the ladies had their faces veiled, shielding their exceptional looks from the eyes of passersby.

Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Li Yuan sent them off personally. Under the lead of the Chu soldiers, they galloped towards the Inner City gates.

It was still before dawn. The pitch-black sky caused everyone to taste the bitter sadness of parting.

Will they ever meet again? Worse, Qin and the six South-Eastern countries were constantly at war. The possibility of having to face each other in battle caused everyone to be all the more melancholic."

Xiang Shaolong thoroughly abhors war, but it is one of the most inevitable realities in this era.

As they approached the palace, a horse carriage protected by a company of horses and men raced out and cut them off. Looks like Li Yanyan has arrived.

The Royal Guard Captain Du Gui galloped over and said, "The Empress Dowager would like to see Master Wan and invites Master Wan up the carriage."

Xiang Shaolong whose face was covered with a bamboo hat nodded and mounted Li Yanyan's horse carriage. Horses and men proceeded towards the Inner City gate.

Li Yanyan removed Xiang Shaolong's bamboo hat and dreamily sized him before saying in approval, "Xiang Shaolong is much better looking than Wan Ruiguang. No wonder Xiu'er is unable to forget you. Oh! I am not saying

that she lusts after your charm and intelligence. Rather your present manner and temperament is a better match for your words and your lofty and heroic ideals."

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "Hadn't Empress Dowager decided not to send us off? Why did she change her mind unexpectedly?"

Li Yanyan threw herself into his bosom impulsively and hugged him with all her strength. She panted, "This is the reason. Thinking about how we might not meet again, Yanyan could not help being depressed and dispirited. If there is a day when Shaolong feels that he cannot prevail over Lu Buwei, the doors of my Great Chu is always open to you."

With the beauty's great favor, and thinking about her desolate and humiliating past, Xiang Shaolong's heart was kindled. He lowered his head, found her scorching lips and gave her deep kiss before baring his heart and saying, "I seldom regret missed romantic relationships. However, reflecting on the coming days, thinking about how I missed the opportunity to share your quilt and pillow, to enjoy the kind of 'silence speaks a thousand words' and 'one spring night beats a thousand pounds of gold' kind of 'good times and beautiful scenery' with you, I can't help but feel the greatest regret."

Li Yanyan's heart and mind were both intoxicated. She said, "Nobody's words of endearment are as beautiful as yours. Still, what is the use of regret? Going by our speed now, it

will take at least half a day before we reach the docks outside the city. There is much we can do!"

Xiang Shaolong said in shock, "Are you saying.... Hei!"

Li Yanyan pasted herself on his cheeks and said plaintively, "Who would know? Xiang Shaolong, didn't you just say that one Spring night is better than a thousand pounds of gold?"

As Xiang Shaolong embraced this woman who was praised as the most youthful and beautiful Empress Dowager in the Warring States Era, all sorts of feelings welled up in his heart.

He had known her but for a few days, but felt as if it had been for half a lifetime. Perhaps, Li Yuan aside, he was the one who understood most her bitter experiences and inner world.

He did not know if he loved her more or pitied her more. But undoubtedly her beauty was sufficient to elicit uncontrollable feelings of adoration in him.

The most tragically romantic thing is that this relationship can last but a moment. That is why Li Yanyan cast off her majesty as Empress Dowager, forsaking everything to send him off and to seize this last opportunity, ensuring that she would never be sad at having missed this short but ever valuable and memorable encounter.

All of a sudden, he melted.

What happened within the carriage was unreal.



Just like a deep and intoxicating dream.

They lost all bearing of where they were.

The setting sun descended West.

Three large ships had set sail, following the River Huai towards Chu's second largest city.

Xiang Shaolong found Shan Rou standing alone aft of the ship. Curious, he asked, "What is Sister Rou doing here?"

Shan Rou irritably replied, "Can't I have some peace and quiet?"

Xiang Shaolong went over and tentatively embraced her shoulders. Seeing that she only flashed him a glance without making another move, he was relieved and kissed her cheeks, gently saying, "If we can kill Tian Dan this time, would Sister Rou be willing to return to Xianyang with us?"

Shan Rou softly and warmly leaned into his bosom and lightly said, "I am used to a wandering lifestyle, treating the world as my home. I am afraid that it would be difficult for me to remain in one place. If I have to see the same people everyday, how tedious it will be. I am not suited for family life."

Xiang Shaolong nodded and said, "This I understand. Hanging around the ends of the earth is certainly a fascinating way of life."

Shan Rou asked curiously, "Aren't you upset that I am so unfeeling?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed nonchalantly and said, "Why should I be angry? What you said was an incontrovertible truth. When one eats the same thing over and over again, even the most exotic delicacies will taste like wax. However, you should at least come to Xianyang to see Shan Lan and her son. Your sister misses you so!"

Shan Rou replied, "I will go to Xianyang some day. However, I have promised someone that I would spend some time with him once this matter is over. We'll see what happens then!"

Xiang Shaolong forced a laugh and said, "Is that your new lover?"

Shan Rou whispered, "I really shouldn't be telling you this, but I don't want to lie to you. I don't know if it was because you had aroused my passions. After we parted, I had a few men, but none could replace you. This man that I intend to spend time with once rescued me from certain death and nursed me back from serious injuries. My feelings towards him started more as gratitude."

Xiang Shaolong was actually filled with jealousy, but on reflection realized that he had had relationships with many women. It was only right for Shan Rou to enjoy relationships with many men. Laughing with relief, he said, "Elder Sister should do whatever she wants. Even if you are married with children, please do not forget to visit us in Xianyang. Moreover, you have to do it before the Qin Crown Prince ascends the throne, else you may never find us again."

Shan Rou turned her head and gazed at him for a long while before saying in astonishment, "You are truly exceptional. All other men have become crazy with envy when they learned that I have another man in my heart. You are the only one who is completely unaffected. Don't you care about me one bit?"

Xiang Shaolong stopped smiling and said, "This is wrong, that is also wrong. What do you want from me?"

Shan Rou's face displayed an eccentric expression, and with a sigh she said, "It is precisely because you are a true-blue wierdo that I Shan Rou am unable to forget you. That is a very painful feeling. Still, I just cannot give up my dream to wander the world. When I am tired of it one day, I will come look for you guys. Will you turn your back on me then?"

Xiang Shaolong released her from his embrace and lazily stretched himself before saying dully, "Don't be oversensitive. As long as you deign to come to Xianyang within seven years, you will definitely find us."

Shan Rou stamped her foot in frustration and said, "I'm won't yield!"

Xiang Shaolong has never seen her act like a spoilt little girl. He was astonished, saying, "What won't you yield to?"

With a face full of irritation, she said, "What aren't you reacting like other men? Its as if you couldn't care less whether I come or not."

Xiang Shaolong bellowed in laughter and said, "Don't you

want your independence? I am refraining from interfering with your way of life yet you are blaming me. What kind of logic is this?"

Shan Rou pondered this for a while before giggling and pouncing on him with a hug. She raised her face which was pretty as a flower, and smiling enchantingly she said, "You are different from everybody else, its no wonder that I want to be intimate with you."

Xiang Shaolong gently said, "Sister Rou should enjoy your life fully. That is everyone's fundamental right. If I say that I was not jealous, I would be lying to you. Its just that I felt that it is not my right to control you. I can only suppress my selfish desires and respect your freedom."

Shan Rou was moved and said, "This is the first time I've heard anything sensible from a man. But will you love me any less because of this?"

Xiang Shaolong calmly replied, "I will never change my love for you, but will force myself not to think about you so much. This is because I will naturally remember that you might be in the arms of another man. That will cause me to be very uncomfortable. Everyone is self centered after all."

Shan Rou gave him a kiss and then tenderly and softly said, "You are very honest. In reality I am also wary of thinking about you for the same reason. I actually regret telling you this. It was only after parting with you that I realized that I could not forget you."

Xiang Shaolong softly kissed her lips and gently said, "Since

this is the reality, both of us should accept it. It is time for dinner. Shall we return to the cabin?"

Shan Rou stubbornly shook her head and said, "No, I am afraid that I will lose your love one of these days."

Xiang Shaolong mirthlessly said, "Elder Sister should stop pulling my leg. How could you be this kind of person? You are merely dissatisfied that I did not react to your affairs with other men as expected. You just want me to surrender, thats all!"

Shan Rou stamped her foot again and said, "I hate you to death. Quickly say that you are jealous to death."

Xiang Shaolong laughed and bent down saying, "Alright, I am jealous to death."

Shan Rou happily said, "This is more like it. Oh! I was just bluffing you just now. No other man has impressed me yet. But don't be too happy. That includes you. Come!"

She then grabbed Xiang Shaolong's hand and led him back to the cabin.

Under the light of the wind lamps (lamps that can resist the wind), Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and Shan Rou sat in a circle on the banquet mat studying the map of the Chu-Qi border that was spread on the coffee table.

Teng Yi said, "After my careful study and analysis, I believe Tian Dan has at most three possible routes back to Qi. The first is to make landfall and discard his boat, ride furiously towards the Fuli pass and then buy a ship at Zhongli and

return to Qi by water. The second is to select a few good horses at Fuli pass and follow the official roads through Peng City, Miao Hill and Kaiyang all the way to the Qi border. The last route is the most circuitous, that is to go East past Mingshan before returning to his country. I have traced the routes on the map in different colours, you should be able to understand at a glance.

As Xiang Shaolong and the rest were pondering the three lines, Shan Rou asserted, "There is no need to consider this further. This person Tian Dan loves comfort. He is sure to have selected the water route. Also, the governor of Zhongli, Xia Ruzhang has always been close with Tian Dan. Whats more, Tian Dan does not know that we are hot on his tail, how could he trade the easy for the difficult?"

Ji Yanran said, "If this is so, we might even be able to reach Zhongli before he embarks."

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

As Tian Dan had pretended to go to Chengyang by boat the day he left, he had to go against the current Westwards for more than ten miles from Shouchun before abandoning his boat and proceeding by land. After that he had to go into the countryside to buy horses for his hundred over people before heading for Fuli pass and Zhongli. With so many delays, he had naturally taken more time.

This person was certainly cunning and despicable. After he had instigated Lord Chunshen to assassinate Xu Xian, he slipped away immediately, leaving the Chu people to deal

with the consequences themselves while he safely remained away from the furore.

Zhao Zhi said, "I am a little puzzled as to why Tian Dan is in such a hurry to return."

Ji Yanran suddenly blanched and said, "Not good. I think Tian Dan wants to deal with Yan!"

Teng Yi was also jolted and said, "Prince Dan is in danger!"

Xiang Shaolong also realized what was happening.

Lu Buwei and Tian Dan's collaboration was based on mutual benefit. What Lu Buwei fears most is an alliance of the six countries, that is why he has always courted Tian Dan, not only hoping to keep Qi out of the alliance, but also hoping that he can damage any alliance between the other five countries.

That Qin armies were powerless to resist the recent incursion by the five countries' allied army further reinforced his thinking.

At the same time, he knew that Chu's past bitter experience would prevent them from allowing Qin to nibble away at the three Jin state's territory, hence he abandoned Chu as an ally in favor of Qi.

Of course Tian Dan knows that Lu Buwei is wildly ambitious, but he knew it was always better to rely on oneself than others. Being strong was the only way out for Qi.

In this era of war, the only way to become strong was to

swallow other countries, expanding one's territory. At the present, Yan was like a juicy pork chop as it had been greatly weakened by its fight with Zhao.

Dian Dan wasn't doing any favors for Lu Buwei either. For instance, the assassination of Xu Xian will actually intensify Qin's internal power struggle. This can only benefit Qi.

Also Lu Buwei should have had to offer something in return. One possibility was to have Prince Dan killed within Qin's borders. If Yan loses this tower of strength, its loss in morale and strength will be incalculable. Tian Dan would then find it even easier to invade and occupy Yan.

With the abrupt question, they were all suddenly clearer about Tian Dan and Lu Buwei's conspiracy.

Ji Yanran somberly said, "If we cannot kill Tian Dan this time, Yan will be finished."

Shan Rou ground her teeth and said, "This time he will not escape!"

Ji Yanran replied, "Zhongli's Xia Ruzhang is intimately related with Tian Dan and may notify him after hearing news of us. If he switches to an overland route, it would be difficult for us to pursue him."

Xiang Shaolong heart was stirred and he said, "Since this is the case, we should beat him at his own game. We should deliberately frighten Xia Ruzhang to determine where Tian Dan is. Then he can forget about returning to Qi alive."

Two days later in the morning, the three big ships sailed into



Zhongli's large harbor.

Xia Ruzhang came to find out their purpose.

The commander in charge of the Chu soldiers was Li Yuan's trusted aide called Li Guang. He was extremely astute. He went down to meet Xia Ruzhang on receiving Xiang Shaolong's instructions.

After he had let Xia Ruzhang inspect the military order that Li Yanyan had personally signed and sealed, Li Guang lowered his voice and said, "We have come to the East this time on a secret mission."

Xia Ruzhang started and asked, "What is the matter?"

Li Guang pulled him aside and replied, "The general must have heard news of the matters in Shouchun."

Xia Ruzhang forced a smile and said, "Not only have I heard rumors, I received the official communique yesterday. It is hard to imagine that Lord Chunshen would end up like this. He must have been senile."

Li Guang said, "He was not senile, but mistakenly trusted a villain's words. Not only did he send men to kill the Qin envoy who was en route to the late King's funeral, he also mounted a rebellion. Empress Dowager and Minister Li were furious, ordering us to lead an army to hunt the person down. General Xia should know who I am speaking of!"

Xia Ru Zhang's expression changed repeatedly. He gravely asked, "Could General Li be a little more explicit?"

Li Guang replied, "Who could it be other than the treacherous bandit Tian Dan? Does General Xia have news of him?"

Xia Ruzhang's limbs shivered and he said with difficulty, "No."

Li Guang knew exactly what was happening, but did not expose him. He whispered, "Tian Dan has to be escaping by water. Can General Xia order people to resupply our three ships immediately? I wish to set sail before dusk."

Of course Xia Ruzhang could not refuse. Li Guang then left him alone and returned to the ship.

After Xia Ruzhang instructed his subordinates, he hurriedly returned to the city.

At that point, Xiang Shaolong had already infiltrated the city. With him were the three ladies Ji Yanran, Shan Rou and Zhao Zhi dressed in men's clothing, as well as Teng Yi, Jing Shan, Wu Guang, Wu Yan and Wu Shu and the rest of the eighteen guardians, and finally Li Guang's deputy Cai Yong. Since they all had official passes, entering and exiting the city was no problem.

As Xia Ruzhang reached the city, he rushed back to his residence without pause.

It was broad daylight. The general's residence was also heavily guarded. Xiang Shaolong and the rest could only sigh at the high wall and split up to monitor each entrance, waiting for nightfall.

Fortunately for them, it was not long before the Xia Ruzhang in civilian garb and two household warriors slipped out the back door and rode quickly towards the South gate.

They were all delighted and followed from a distance.

Xia Ru Zhang went straight out of the South gate and proceeded across the countryside. At dusk, he arrived at a manor concealed in the woods.

Outside the forest grove, a river flowed from the Northwest, joining with the Huai River five miles downstream and flowing East.

There seemed to be a small wharf there, with four large fishing boats moored.

They all rejoiced.

Teng Yi said, "I will go and clean up the boats and the men in them. Third Brother should enter the manor and deal with Tian Dan. Be careful, Tian Dan has many followers and they are mean."

Leading half the guardians, he headed for the wharf.

Xiang Shaolong exhorted Ji Yanran, saying, "Yanran should lead Zhi Zhi and remain outside the manor, using the crossbows to stop anyone from escaping or to kill them. I will infiltrate the manor with Sister Rou to see if Tian Dan is inside."

Ji Yanran gave a terse affirmation and spread out with the rest.

Xiang Shaolong gave Shan Rou a signal and they both infiltrated the manor quick as the devil. In a short while and without incident, they arrived at the underbrush along the manor's Eastern wall.

As this manor was surrounded by high walls, it was not possible to see what was happening inside from close up.

At this point, the night had descended, the stars were in the sky and the moonlight was bewildering.

Dim light escaped from the manor. The two of them used a rope to straddle the high wall and noiselessly dropped into the open courtyard behind the wall.

Xiang Shaolong and Shan Rou climbed up the roof ridge of the nearest residence. They saw rows upon rows of rooms and for a moment did not know where to begin.

Shan Rou whispered into his ear, "Tian Dan likes South facing houses. Let us look into that block."

Xiang Shaolong looked towards where she was pointing, but only saw landscaped gardens in the South. These gardens were filled with flowers and trees, ponds and miniature rock mountains and pavilions. A brook flowed through the garden, forded by white bridges. It was peaceful and tranquil. The other half was filled with high buildings.

With one look, one could tell that this manor was a summer retreat for high ranking officials. It was probably also Xia Ruzhang's private estate which Tian Dan was borrowing for his use.

Without speaking, the two of them vaulted over numerous roofs in one breath. They came to the center of the manor and discovered human voices and images on the other side of the little bridge. The two of them did not dare to be careless. They kept their distance and using their grappling hooks, they traversed the treetops towards another tall tree on the other bank of the brook before dropping back to ground. Thus they bypassed the sentries. Next they climbed up to the roof of a tall brightly-lit building.

Human voices carried up from below.

They heard Tian Dan's voice saying, "Is this is for real? Logically, Li Yuan should not have been able to overcome Lord Chunshen."

The next voice was Xia Ruzhang's, saying, "Its definitely true. I received Empress Dowager's official command yesterday to monitor the mountain pass closely. The communiqué also announced that Li Quan, Li Ling, Dou Jie and Cheng Suning had all been publicly beheaded."

The two of them rejoiced and couldn't help giving each other a kiss.

After untold hardships, they had caught up to the old thief Tian Dan.

Tian Dan was speechless for a while before coldly snorting, "Li Yuan is really foolhardy, sending people to hunt me down. Ruzhang, why don't you follow me back to Qi?"

Xia Ruzhang sighed, "My family and property are all here.

How can I go at will? We can discuss this matter later. The most important question now is how to plan for Minister Tian's safe return."

After a pause, he continued, "They managed to guess that you would return to Qi by the waterways. If Minister Tian leaves by the land route, they will chase empty air. I think Minister Tian should not wait for General Dan Chu anymore. As long as Minister Tian returns to Qi safely, no matter how much guts Li Yuan has, he would not dare to touch Dan Chu and the rest."

Xiang Shaolong did not have any more interest in their conversation. He kissed Shan Rou again and said, "Second Brother should have cleaned up the people at the docks. Let us create a little confusion, are you ready?"

Shan Rou's eyes betrayed deep emotion and she whispered, "I have waited for more than ten years!" Xiang Shaolong raised the signal rocket in his hand.

The fireworks flew skywards and exploded into a blood red flower of light.

## CHAPTER 11

## Avenging The Great Enmity

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

XIANG SHAOLONG and Shan Rou started their ferocious attack. From their vantage point up in the roof, they rapidly shot down more than ten men before Teng Yi and the rest forced open the gates and rushed into the manor.

The two were puzzled when they did not see Tian Dan escape from inside the building. They rapidly climbed up the roof and entered the room through the skylight. There, they quickly found a secret tunnel that Tian Dan and his men used to escape. They plunged in immediately, giving chase.

The tunnel was wide and straight, reinforced with wooden pillars and rammed earth panels. It even had ventilation ducts, demonstrating its meticulous construction.

The two of them did not dare to light a torch and could only grope forward using the wall as a guide. They soon reached the other end of the tunnel, realizing that it actually emptied out into the fringe of the forest grove. Right outside the grove stood the little wharf. The fishing boats had long been scuttled. Ten over human shadows were escaping upriver along the bank.

Xiang Shaolong fired a signal rocket before the two of them gave chase.

After a mad sprint, six of the opponents fell back, drew their swords and attacked towards them.

How would Xiang Shaolong have the patience to dicker with them? He drew out his flying needles, waved his hands and shot out the needles under the cover of night. The six men fell to the ground en masse.

The remaining seven enemies did not anticipate that their six comrades could not even delay them by one second. With a shout of command, they left the river bank and scattered towards a small hill and the jungle by the river.

Xiang Shaolong fired another two needles, instantly felling two more enemies.

Shan Rou's bloodlust was kindled and she threw her flying dagger. An enemy who had just started climbing the hill was



hit in the back and tumbled down. At this moment, Shan Rou recognized one of the men racing up the hill as Tian Dan. Strength surged into her legs from God knows where as she overtook Xiang Shaolong, flying up the hill like an arrow, catching up with the enemy.

Xiang Shaolong feared for her safety and gathering his energy, chased up the hill.

The sound of clashing blades rang out. Shan Rou's delicate shouts interspersed with the enemy's blood-curdling shrieks. However, peace and tranquility was quickly restored.

By the time Xiang Shaolong reached the hilltop, the two fighters had already separated. They were both covered with blood. Fresh blood flowed from Shan Rou's left arm and right shoulder.

Tian Dan was holding a long sword facing Shan Rou. His diaphragm was heaving up and down. His face was pale as a corpse under the moonlight.

Tian Dan took a glimpse at Xiang Shaolong and laughed bitterly, saying, "Bravo, you have finally caught me!"

Shan Rou said vehemently, "Tian Dan, do you know who I am?"

Hoofbeats sounded. Teng Yi and the rest arrived with torches, surrounding the three people in a circle.

Zhao Zhi shrieked and flew down her horse, viciously shouting, "When you put the three generations of my family to death, did you ever think there would be this day?"

Shan Rou said icily, "He is mine. I want to kill him with my own hands!"

Xiang Shaolong went to Zhao Zhi's side and whispered, "Let your Sister Rou do it!"

With a "Hua" sound, Zhao Zhi leaned into Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and started crying agitatedly.

Tian Dan remained calm and laughed loudly, saying, "I Tian Dan have killed countless people in my lifetime. How can I remember whom I have killed before? Xiang Shaolong, you are good. I, Tian Dan, submit to you!"

Reversing his blade, he slashed his neck and fell backwards, dying instantly.

Shan Rou's entire body began to shiver and she knelt down.

Zhao Zhi rushed over and held her tightly.

The two women cried bitterly on each other's shoulders. Their cries resonated through the whole forest.

This category defining, ruthless and ambitious person had finally perished.

Teng Yi jumped off his horse, cut off Tian Dan's head and shouted mightily, "Let us go!"

Xiang Shaolong was numb in his heart.

It was a feeling that was hard to describe.

On the one hand he was pleased that Shan Rou, her sisters and Teng Yi had avenged the extermination of their family.

He had also accomplished an impossible goal himself.

But seeing this historically celebrated character committing suicide in front of him gave him a sense of loss.

Still, this had all become an unchangeable piece of history.

When Xiao Pan ascends the throne and the evil Lu Buwei had been killed, he would leave this warring central plains and live the peaceful secluded life he had always dreamed of. He would never again return to the central plains.

They returned to their ships and set sail back to Shouchun.

That evening the whole party drank themselves silly and slept all day the next day before waking at different times.

Xiang Shaolong came to the cabin with a hangover. The three ladies were chatting in a low voice. They looked happy and at ease.

Zhao Zhi gleefully called out, "Shaolong, Sister Rou is willing to return with us to Xianyang!"

Xiang Shaolong was extremely pleased and replied, "That day you really were lying to me!"

Shan Rou displayed an unreasonable yet lovely look and said, "Told you I was bluffing long ago. I'm still angry when I think about it. You were totally unaffected."

Ji Yanran laughed and said, "Sister Rou should not be angry. Our husband keeps everything in his heart. His words are hard but his heart is soft. You must not blame him!"

Shan Rou replied disdainfully, "He is your husband, what

does that have to do with Shan Rou?"

She then giggled lovably and gave him a sweet smile.

Everyone knew her disposition and naturally nobody took her words for real.

They sailed upriver. The ship moved slowly. They took a day more returning than they did setting out, eventually reaching Shouchun.

Xiang Shaolong did not stop but continued sailing towards Chengyang as he had promised Madam Zhuang that he would visit her for few days as he passed by Dian on his way home.

After disembarking, they rendezvoused with their special forces troops and headed South towards Dian.

Madam Zhuang and her son was accompanied by the freshly minted General Dong Luzi. He commanded eight thousand Chu soldiers and had recovered most of the territory occupied by the rebel army. As the people of Dian found out that Zhuang Baoyi had returned, they revolted in large numbers and joined the new Dian army. This army grew to about twenty thousand people and they joined hands with the Chu army. They were presently besieging the Dian capital Gaoze.

Gaoze sits on a plateau with its back against a mountain, truly an impregnable stronghold. Since the city had adequate water and food, the allied army had not been able to defeat the defenders and had even lost close to a thousand men.

Witnessing the demise of the Yelang King, all the vassal states dispatched armies in the restorative effort. The Qielan King even led the soldiers himself, forcing entry into the Yelang capital and setting up a new ruler before returning in triumph. From then, Yelang people were never again strong enough to bully the neighboring vassal states.

As Xiang Shaolong and his men reached the allied army camp at Gaoze, the besieging soldiers had just suffered a defeat. Casualties littered the field, piled on one another.

When Lou Wuxin and Madam Zhuang knew that Xiang Shaolong had come as promised, they were overjoyed at the unexpected news and ushered everyone into the camp.

Lou Wuxin wanted to organize a feast to welcome the party from their journey but was refused tactfully by Xiang Shaolong. They held a meeting immediately at the commander's tent, looking for ways to defeat the city.

After listening to Lou Wuxin detail Gaoze's terrain and environment, Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "The most formidable characteristic of the city is that it is set against the mountain. We will use this to our advantage. I can guarantee that we will be in the city within three days."

Madam Zhuang, Lou Wuxin and the rest of the high-ranking officers all bugged their eyes in disbelief.

That night, Xiang Shaolong and his party marched through the night and arrived at the rocky mountain behind Gaoze before setting camp and organizing his soldiers.

The next morning after Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi had thoroughly reconnoitered the mountain, they identified five routes of approach and sent men up to install metal hoops at regular intervals and to deploy climbing equipment.

These were all basic techniques taught to all the elite special forces. With the installations complete, at nightfall, Xiang Shaolong and his party used the climbing equipment and specially installed rock steps to quickly ascend to the undulating and overgrown mountaintop.

The seven to eight mile long Gaoze city wall stretched in both directions from beneath their feet.

Lou Wuxin was marshaling his army, besieging the city night and day, drawing the attention of the rebel army.

War cries and the sound of stone piercing projectiles rang out unceasingly.

Ji Yanran and the two ladies also reached the summit at this moment. They crouched beside Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi while delicately catching their breath.

Where they were, it was only about seven hundred feet from the bottom. The average person would be shocked when looking down, but it was child's play for the elite special forces who regularly trained on the moon reaching mountain near the Wu family ranch. That mountain was three times the height of this mountain.

Teng Yi issued a single command and the four especially skilled men Jing Shan, Wu Shu, Wu Ji and Dan Quan

immediately abseiled down using the climbing equipment. After finding a foothold, they hammered in an iron loop and installed a new climbing apparatus.

Their equipment was built according to the designs of twenty-first century climbing experts. Resting on the overlapping loops at their waists, they glided down as fast as lightning and as easily as if they were playing a game.

The four men quickly reached the undergrowth at the foot of the mountain. They were only separated from the South-facing rear wall of the city by a moat.

The sentries on top of the wall had all gone to the other three wall segments to help in defense. Only the few sentry towers were manned. Moreover, it was difficult for the sentries to see into the pitch black area beneath the walls.

Teng Yi issued another order and the Wu family special forces followed their usual drill, sliding down under the cover of the hillside trees as well as the darkness. At this moment, Jing Shan and the rest of the four men had installed the device to traverse the moat.

Ji Yanran gazed at the ant-like civilian conscripts in the city and said, "From a cursory glance we can tell that this regime is maintained only through military force. The residents are all being forced into labour with whips."

Everyone looked closely and realized it was just as Ji Yanran had observed. The city residents were merely carrying materials under close watch and the threat of whips. They all had an expression of bitter resignation.

This moment, a mounted patrol came from one end of the wall. The patrolmen were carrying wind lamps scanning the bottom of the wall and the mountain.

Everyone had a fright and hurriedly hid themselves. Jing Shan and other others crouched at the foot of the wall. What was most worrisome were the four moat crossing contraptions. As long as the other party was alert, they would surely spot them.

Even though the contraptions had been camouflaged with a dark non-reflective grease, but they were not invisible after all.

Xiang Shaolong was born quick-witted. As the patrolmen's lamplight was almost on the contraptions, he puckered his lips and emitted a shrill sound like a night owl.

The patrolmen naturally raised their lamps towards the mountain, but were unable to see anything unusual. When they turned back, they had passed the contraptions and rapidly rode away.

Everyone was covered in a sheet of cold sweat.

Shan Rou came over and said, "At least this chap has some creative methods!"

Jing Shan and the rest shot out their grappling hooks, clasped onto the wall and climbed up rapidly, agile as monkeys. They split up to take care of the sentries in the towers.

The Wu family warriors crossed the moat and started



climbing the wall in groups. Their movements were nimble and quick, demonstrating astonishing efficiency.

Seeing them, Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of pride. Even the twenty-first century special forces may not be at this level.

By this time, close to a thousand men have descended to the foot of the mountain. Those who had crested the wall took out their crossbows and guarded the parapets.

Teng Yi chuckled softly, "Second Brother is itching for a fight. I will go first."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Lets go together!"

When Xiang Shaolong and his party had reached the top of the wall, the thousand plus Wu family elite warriors had split into four groups, preparing to attack the wall in both directions and also towards the city center.

Teng Yi fired a signal rocket to notify Lou Wuxin that they had penetrated the city successfully.

After Xiang Shaolong had assigned people to defend all the entry points on the wall, he led the three women and five hundred soldiers towards the city center.

Teng Yi was responsible for capturing the wall.

Bugles sounded.

All of a sudden, the warriors shouted as one, "The city is breached! the city is breached!"

The conscripted defenders in the city were startled. The sound of killing rose to the heavens. Looking to the back wall

they saw a large flag atop a tall post inscribed with the word, 'Zhuang'. Several hundred soldiers flew down from the walls in attack.

Those residents who were forced into labour cried out at the same time and threw down the firewood, stone and other materials that they were carrying. They dispersed and escaped, even echoing, "The city is breached! The city is breached!"

The breakdown in order and discipline spread like an epidemic.

Xiang Shaolong and his contingent swarmed down the stairs on the city walls like locusts. Crossbow bolts flew like rain. The enemy soldiers fell to the ground in droves. In the blink of an eye, they had obtained control of the rear city gate and the nearby square and buildings.

Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to open the city gate and let down the drawbridge. At the same time, he commanded men to lay out a defense grid on the rooftops of buildings.

The enemies who rushed forward were all driven back in a hail of bolts.

Their own men flowed in endlessly through the city gate. They even brought with them lances, tall shields and other heavy weaponry.

Teng Yi took advantage of the enemy's chaos and swept through each section of the Northwestern wall.

Lou Wuxin's besieging troops attacked the East gate with all

their might, concentrating the enemy's attention there.

The soldiers who had occupied the Northwestern wall used their superior ground to shoot down the enemy soldiers who were rushing about trying to hinder the attackers.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the timing was opportune and waved his arm in a signal.

Row after row of Wu family warriors raised their lances and advanced towards the three gates in the East, West and North under the cover of archery fire. The battle was pitched and desperate.

The Wu family warriors on the wall shouted loudly once again, "Those who abandon their weapons and squat on the ground are not to be killed, those who abandon their weapons and squat on the ground are not to be killed!"

Repeating endlessly. This was of course a scheme that Xiang Shaolong came up with based on modern psychological warfare techniques he had learned.

Many of the residences were on fire. Raging flames rose from the rooftops, spreading to the surrounding buildings. The whole city was bathed in the orange glow of the fire. Thick smoke covered the sky. The moon and stars were obscured and dim.

The defending soldiers discarded their weapons in large numbers. They joined the city residents in squatting at the corners of the city walls, squares and thoroughfares. Their morale had dissipated.

The insides of the city had turned into a chaotic battleground. The Wu family warriors organized themselves in tight units and continuously expanded the ground under their control.

The warriors up on the city walls progressed even more swiftly. The resisting enemies were slaughtered until their blood ran like rivers. Corpses littered the parapets.

The wounded were rapidly moved to the South wall to be treated by medical specialists. The entire operation was clear and orderly.

This is the first time the special forces have demonstrated their prowess in a large scale campaign. It was truly out of the ordinary.

Under the cover of a company of archers and shield men, Xiang Shaolong led the three ladies and the eighteen guardians towards the inner castle. At this point, the West and North gates had fallen into their control. The gates had been opened and the horses and men of the allied army were rushing into the city.

The enemy soldiers defending the inner castle resisted bitterly. Xiang Shaolong and his party threw themselves into attack, rushing left and slashing right. They broke through the inner castle gate shortly, and attacked towards the palace.

The enemy soldiers knew they had lost and discarded their weapons, surrendering by the lot.

Xiang Shaolong instructed his men to concentrate the surrendered enemy soldiers in one location under guard. Lou Wuxin and Zhuang Kong were leading a thousand elite troops and they rushed in. Once the two armies met up, they swept through the city even more quickly. In less than the time it took for a cup of tea to cool, they had attacked into the palace.

The interior of the palace was a mess, and cries of grief shook the heavens. The palace women and children were huddled in a group, trembling and asking for forgiveness. The garrison soldiers were all kneeling in surrender.

Xiang Shaolong took pity on them and found men to console them and look after them.

"Peng!"

The door of the main palace hall was forced open. They saw about thirty enemy officers and soldiers in a circle with their swords raised, protecting a youth wearing royal robes and a crown. The situation was bleak.

The sounds of crying and killing outside gradually subsided. It was clear that Gaoze City had fallen into the hands of the besieging soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong and his men gathered in front of the enemy soldiers in large numbers. More than ten crossbows were aimed at the enemies at the center of the hall.

Zhuang Kong bellowed, "Surrender immediately or be killed without mercy!"

Lou Wuxin moved close to Xiang Shaolong and whispered, "This kid has done much evil, raping countless women. Death is too good for him."

That youth in royal robes raised his head and yelled back, "I am Li Ling's son Li Qi. I will die before surrendering!"

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said, "You know my preference. I'll let you take charge of this!"

Heaving a big sigh, he ushered the three ladies back out of the hall. Behind them, the sound of concentrated crossbow fire rang out along with the sound of wretched cries before gradually becoming silent again.

It had taken three days to recover Gaoze. Xiang Shaolong took his leave of Madam Zhuang, her son, the You sisters and others, all unwilling to be parted. They then hurried back to Xiangyang.

It could be said that this trip to Chu had yielded them good results. Not only did they manage to kill Tian Dan, they had also helped Chu and Dian in big way. Nonetheless because Xu Xian's status was unknown and also because Prince Dan had been captured in Xianyang, everyone's feeling of triumph was greatly diminished.

As they went through customs, their old friend An Gu personally invited them into the official building.

Xiang Shaolong saw that the Qin soldiers were all wearing a white sash on their arms and knew that things had turned for the worse.

Sure enough, An Gu said in grief, "Premier Xu was seriously injured in an ambush and died en route back to Xianyang."

A torrent of hate welled up in Xiang Shaolong and gushed towards heaven. Lu Buwei was certainly more malicious than a ravenous wolf. Just for a little personal gain, he had forgotten about Qin's overall situation. He would unscrupulously get rid of anything or anyone who got in his way.

The two of them originally had no cause for enmity, only favor. Yet he wanted to kill him just because King Zhuangxiang, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan were close to him.

Now he had used such a despicable method to kill Xu Xian, it made him gnash his teeth in pain and hatred.

An Gu sighed and said, "It has been confirmed that this was perpetrated by Lord Chunshen. The Chu people have sent over Lord Chunshen's head and even offered to cede five cantons to parley for peace. But how could we let this go like this?"

Xiang Shaolong rode along with him, saying in pain, "If we proceed like this, we would have succumbed to Lu Buwei's evil designs. Precisely he is now using this critical situation to expand his powers. The true culprit for Premier Xu's murder is Lu Buwei. Lord Chunshen was but a puppet under his strings!"

An Gu's countenance changed and he exclaimed, "What?"

The next day, Xiang Shaolong set off immediately for

Xianyang.

It was now three days into Winter and the weather was bitter cold. Without realizing it, they had been away from Xianyang for five months.

Eighteen days later, Xianyang finally appeared before their eyes.

The elite special forces automatically returned to the Wu family ranch while Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Ji Yanran, the women and the eighteen guardians braced their weary bodies and returned to Xianyang.

As they entered the city, they heard another piece of bad news, Lu Gong had fallen ill.

The illness was caused by anger.

The moment Xu Xian's body returned to Xianyang, Lu Gong had cried violently over the corpse, collapsing on the spot. Since then he has been ill and has not risen.

As one wave subsides another rises.

Xiang Shaolong and his party rushed towards the commander-in-chief's residence.

The moment he stepped in, he knew that something was wrong.

The residence was filled with Wang Ling and other high ranking officers, ministers and Lu Gong's family. The sound of weeping permeated the place.

While Xiang Shaolong thought that Lu Gong had already



passed away, Wang Ling pulled Xiang Shaolong into the inner hall and said in deep grief, "Quick, go see the commander-in-chief one last time. He's been waiting for you, unwilling to take his last breath until you arrive."

Hot tears flowed from Xiang Shaolong's eye sockets.

He suddenly realized that in reality, he not only looked upon Lu Gong as a venerable friend and superior, deep within his heart he had also started to treat Lu Gong as a close relative. He had developed the intimacy and reluctance to part as if a son to a father.

Lu Gong was lying on a couch, his complexion as white as paper. His two eyes were tightly closed, and he breathed with difficulty.

Xiao Pan stood at his side holding his hand. His expression was shockingly calm.

Lu Dan'er knelt on his other side weeping bitterly. Two noblewomen who must be her seniors were looking after her.

Jing Jun, Lord Changwen, Lord Changping, Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, Li Si, Lao Ai and the rest were all there, standing outside the door.

Everyone let out a happy expression when they saw Xiang Shaolong.

Lu Buwei also displayed an appearance of happiness and embraced Xiang Shaolong's shoulder, softly saying, "It's good that Shaolong is back. Quickly go in and see the commander-

in-chief one last time."

Xiang Shaolong really felt like slaughtering him then and there. As he was about to wrest himself out of the embrace, Lu Buwei released him.

Jing Jun rushed forward holding his brows and called out "Third Brother" and couldn't help turning hoarse and crying bitterly. Those who heard could not help but feel sad too.

Xiao Pan's imposing body started and looking over, he saw Xiang Shaolong. His eyes emitted a look of profound emotion but his expression was extraordinarily serene. He unhurriedly said, "Grand Tutor, please hurry in!"

The Lu Gong who was leaning on the couch let out an 'Ah' sound and awakened.

Xiao Pan gravely ordered, "Please help Miss Dan'er outside!"

Lu Dan'er stood up and was about to protest when her legs gave way and she fainted into the bosom of the two noblewomen. Jing Jun rushed over and carried her out.

Xiang Shaolong came to the side of the couch. At this point only Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were in the room with Lu Gong. As Xiao Pan had not given permission, the others did not dare to enter. The only one who would dare to rush in was Lu Buwei, but he had his own motives and chose to remain outside.

Lu Gong ferociously opened his eyes and swept over the men. His face blushed red and he unexpectedly struggled to sit up.

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan glanced at each other, both fearing the worst. They knew that he had seen Xiang Shaolong and was using his last gasp of life. It would be hard to hold on after this.

The two people helped him sit up.

Hot tears flowed from the corners of of Lu Gong's eyes and he rasped, "Was Xu Xian killed by that treacherous thief?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded distressedly, his own tears falling uncontrollably.

Lu Gong grasped their hands, one in each hand. With a trembling voice, he said into their ears, "Protect the Crown Prince. Kill the traitor. Avenge me and Xu Xian. Remember this, remember!"

He then breathed his last, let go of their hands and passed away.

# VOLUME 17

## CHAPTER 1

### Hatred Caused By Love

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

IN their half a year apart, Xiao Pan has matured further, becoming even more adept at hiding his feelings.

Leaving the commander-in-chief's residence, Xiang Shaolong

followed Xiao Pan back to the palace. Teng Yi, Ji Yanran and the rest returned to the Wu residence. Lu Gong's funeral arrangements would be arranged by the ceremonial official appointed by Xiao Pan.

They entered the study. When Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong had been left alone, Xiao Pan slapped the table and said in fury, "Ten thousand deaths is not enough to atone for this traitor's guilt."

Xiang Shaolong sat down forlornly beneath him and said somberly, "Why was Xu Xian sent to Shouchun?"

Xiao Pan appeared fearful of being blamed and explained, "Lu Buwei had exhorted me to ally with Chu and Qi to attack the three Jin states. He persisted in asking for Xu Xian to travel to Chu to repair relations and even wanted me to take a Chu princess as my wife. Empress Dowager could have been confused by Lao Ai as she strongly supported Lu Buwei together with Wang Wan, Cai Ze and the others. I was not able to resist them and had no choice but to agree. At that time I thought that Lu Buwei only wanted to keep Xu Xian away from Xianyang for a period of time to deter Lu Gong from harassing him. Who would know that the Chu people would be so reckless, actually daring to assassinate the envoy who was representing me.

For the first time, Xiang Shaolong felt hatred for Zhu Ji. He was pained to silence.

Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang Chi had always been the three pillars of the military. Now only Wang Chi remained. Worse,

this person was close to Lu Buwei. The status quo he had painstakingly created had been destroyed overnight.

Presently, amongst the military and the government heavyweights, he could barely count on one person Wang Ling to be on their side. The rest like Meng Ao were part of Lu Buwei's inner circle. Du Bi too had ulterior motives. This was the most precarious situation he had encountered since coming to Qin.

Xiao Pan sighed and said, "The biggest headache now is the vacant Left Premier's post left behind by Xu Xian. Lu Buwei has recommended Wang Wan, and Empress Dowager is leaning towards this proposition. It is very difficult for me to object. In terms of experience and seniority, no one besides Cai Ze is more qualified than he is to become the Left Premier."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "This matter is critical. No matter what we do, we must not let the Left Premier position fall into the hands of Lu Buwei's men, else the Qin court will be safely in Lu Buwei's pocket within three years."

He turned towards Xiao Pan and queried, "Does Crown Prince have a candidate in mind?"

Xiao Pan replied, "If it was up to me, I would go against convention and promote Li Si. He is ten times as talented as Wang Wan."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said, "Going by ability, there is no problem with Li Si, but he is not a native of Qin. Even if no one objects, you should not promote an outsider

thus before you have stabilized your own position. This will only put you at odds with the Qin community."

Xiao Pan was silent for a while before nodding his head, saying, "Master is right. We should not do so at present. Ai! Its good that you are back! Finally there is someone to help me think through plans."

Xiang Shaolong gazed at Xiao Pan for a while before saying, "You have already done very well to drag things up to this point."

He stood up and started pacing, but his mind remained a blank. He mumbled, "The candidate must first be a Qin native, and then must be someone we trust absolutely. The next criterion must be that he is young and have high ideals, so as not to be easily bribed by Lu Buwei. At the same time, he must clearly understand our relationship with Lu Buwei and must also have the support of the military. Where can we find this person?"

Xiao Pan sighed and said, "This person is you my Master. But I already know that you will refuse."

Xiang Shaolong jumped once and said, "I know! This person is Lord Changping!"

Xiao Pan was startled for a while before cupping his head and saying, "Isn't he a little soft?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Of course he's a little soft. But this

tactic is called 'feigning one thing and doing another'<sup>5</sup>. The feint is Lord Changping. The real person in the shadows is Li Si. Lord Changping is a noble kinsman of the King. Even Wang Wan will find it difficult not to give in to him!"

Xiao Pan asked in bafflement, "I understand what 'repairing the plank road' means, but what is Chencang?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly berated himself for slipping once again. This is because this incident would only happen during Chu and Han's conflict many years later. Xiao Pan had naturally never heard of it. He could only invent some nonsense, saying, "That refers to an obsolete and unused warehouse that nobody notices"<sup>6</sup>. In short, Li Si is the true Premier while Lord Changping is the figurehead."

Xiao Pan was still hesitant and pointed out in doubt, "Lord Changping's treasured sister is very close to Guan Zhongxie. If Yingying is married to Guan Zhongxie, won't that present some problems?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "This might have been a problem previously, but now as long as the Changping brothers know that Xu Xian was murdered by Lu Buwei, it would be useless for him even if Guan Zhongxie marries their mother."

Xiao Pan laughed bitterly from his belly and said, "Master

<sup>5</sup> The actual phrase used here is 'Openly repairing the plank road while secretly crossing the river Wei at Chencang'. Its a reference to a stratagem used by Liu Bang in 206BC against Xiangyu of Chu (reference from MDBG.net). Its meaning is close to what is written above 'feigning one thing and doing another'.

<sup>6</sup> Chencang is the ancient name of Baoji city (reference from MDBG.net). XSL is associating the word 'chen' with 'chenjiu' meaning 'obsolete'; and the word 'cang' with 'cangku' meaning 'warehouse'. Hence XSL's rubbish explanation above.



should not provoke me, this is not the time to be laughing."

As Xiang Shaolong thought about Xu Xian and Lu Gong, his enthusiasm diminished and he said solemnly, "This is but the first step. The second step is to recall Wang Jian and use him to counter Wang Chi, Meng Ao and Du Bi. I am sure that he will become the cornerstone of our Great Qin's military someday. Throwing in Huan Qi and Wang Ling, they will be even more formidable than Xu Xian and Lu Gong."

Xiao Pan stood up abruptly and replied, "How do we get past the Empress Dowager? She is sure to reject this because of Lord Changping's lack of experience."

Xiang Shaolong thought for an instant before saying confidently, "Allow me to persuade her personally."

Xiao Pan shook his head and cautioned, "Empress Dowager is no longer the Queen mother of last time. After Lao Ai obtained her favor, Empress Dowager has become even more infatuated with him. She also feels that I am becoming less obedient to her. I believe that Master's influence over her is no longer what it used to be. Also, Lu Buwei has been courting Lao Ai, else mother would not be supporting him."

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "Then I should speak to Lao Ai! I cannot believe that he would be willing to allow Lu Buwei to become more powerful. Now that I am back, he is no longer alone. He should now have the guts to betray Lu Buwei."

Xiao Pan nodded and said, "Let's do as Master says. If all our methods fail, we can just summon Lu Buwei and Guan

Zhongxie into the palace and have Master kill them with the sword once and for all. After that we can trump up some charge and pick up the pieces."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and replied, "What kind of plan is this? The bulk of the military strength is now with Meng Ao. If we do this, the outcome would be unpredictable. Moreover the palace is steeped with Lu Buwei's spies. If anything goes wrong, we will be the ones to lose out."

Xiao Pan sighed and was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong remembered Prince Dan and asked about his situation.

Xiao Pan nonchalantly replied, "Lu Buwei has invited him to his new official residence and detained him there. It is unknown whether he is alive or dead. His subordinates have been placed under house arrest in the guesthouse. They are not allowed to step out of the gates. Guan Zhongxie's men are guarding the place. I did not feel that this was a big deal and I had too many things to worry about, hence I did not get involved."

Xiang Shaolong beheld him in astonishment, trepidation rising from the bottom of his heart.

Qin Shihuang is Qin Shihuang after all, promoting expedience while discounting benevolence and righteousness. Just based on Xiao Pan's manner, one could tell that he had no qualms about having Lu Buwei kill Prince Dan. This would after all remove one of the obstacles in the way of his future unification of China.

As he reflected on this, he realized that to move Xiao Pan in this matter, he would have to appeal to benefit.

After he thought for a while, he heaved a long sigh and said, "Doing this, Crown Prince is actually elevating the other party and putting himself down."

Xiao Pan stared blankly for a while and said, "So even this a problem?"

Xiang Shaolong forthrightly said, "If Crown Prince remains aloof on this matter, the prestige that Crown Prince painstakingly created by quelling the rebellion at the royal hunt will dissipate, causing people to think that the only one in charge in Xianyang is that stinking Premier Mentor Lu Buwei. It is said that when two countries battle, envoys are not to be harmed. Prince Dan has come from afar to attend the funeral of your late father. He has been seized by Lu Buwei, but the charge will be leveled at you. Will the Eastern six kingdoms trust you in the future if you do not observe righteousness and justice? "

Xiao Pan was startled and said, "Why does Master sing the same tune as Li Si? Looks like there is some reason there. But what if Prince Dan has already been killed by Lu Buwei?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and replied, "How could Lu Buwei be so willing to kill Prince Dan? This matter is clearly directed at me. On the other hand, it is also to help that devil Tian Dan defeat Yan."

He paused for a while before giving a cold snort, saying, "Mo Ao was killed publicly by me, removing the old scoundrel's

chief tactician. Worse, his prestige was damaged. As someone who is paranoid about winning, how could he swallow this? Still he did not have a way to deal with us directly. His only method was to use Prince Dan. At the most I would barge into the residence demanding the person. He would then be able to kill me or stick some charge on me."

Xiao Pan coolly said, "Still, this matter had the tacit approval of mother. Lu Gong and Xu Xian voiced opposition many times but were always suppressed by mother and the scoundrel Lu. Hei! It is also difficult for me!"

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming. Xiao Pan was right. Zhu Ji has definitely changed a lot this half a year.

Xiao Pan said, "From tomorrow, Master must attend the morning court. Ai! The number of people who dare to oppose Lu Buwei are diminishing by the day."

He paused and then continued, "Is there anyway to recall An Gu?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said, "The bulk of our Great Qin's military strength is now concentrated at the border. The seven cities are in the hands of Meng Ao, Wang Chi and Du Bi. The rest belong to Wang Jian and An Gu. If we recall both Wang Jian and An Gu, we will lose all out external support. This is something we must never do."

Using this as a segway, he asked, "What has come of Huan Qi's effort to build a contingency force?"

Xiao Pan was reenergized and replied, "The two of them

Huan Qi and Little Ben have been traveling all over the country, personally selecting talent. They now have an army of close to ten thousand. Li Si has given this division the name 'Rapid Response Division'. It sounds appropriate."

He snorted again and said, "Nonetheless Lu Buwei has hindered Huan Qi in many ways. On the surface he agrees to everything, but in secret he opposes everything. I wanted to promote Li Si by one grade to become a minister-of-state in the government and military, but was stiffly blocked by Empress Dowager and Lu Buwei. I am unable to move a single step. Master needs to think of a plan for me."

Xiang Shaolong was vexed. He was without Xu Xian and Lu Gong while the enemy had Meng Ao and Wang Chi. He was himself unschooled in top level military and civil administration. How was he to overcome Lu Buwei?

Thinking to this point, his heart jolted, calculating that if he could swing Meng Ao over, everything would be solved. While it would be difficult to instigate Meng Ao to rebel, he had a chance because Lu Buwei had once tried to murder Meng Ao's two sons. Nonetheless he must first win over Meng Wu and Meng Tian. His heart was stirred and he had already formulated a plan.

Xiang Shaolong summed up, "The matter of utmost importance right now is to capture the position of Left Premier for our man, and then to increase Wang Jian's profile to counter the two men Meng Ao and Wang Chi. I will take care of Prince Dan personally."

They continued discussing the details especially on Prince Dan's situation before Xiang Shaolong left Xiao Pan's study.

As he stepped across the study door, he did not know where to go for a moment.

He desired most to return to the Wu residence to see Zhao Ya. Nonetheless, in the name of righteousness and justice, he needed to console Prince Dan's subordinates Xu Yize and the rest. However, the most critical person he had to talk to was actually Lao Ai, to instigate an alliance against Lu Buwei.

After a while of indecision, Li Si's voice sounded in his ear saying, "Official Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong recovered his spirit and joyfully cried, "Brother Li!"

Li Si grabbed him in one hand and led him to the imperial garden through a side door.

It was now afternoon and the sky was covered in heavy clouds, suggesting a blizzard.

As they arrived at a small pavilion, Li Si released him, sighed and said, "The scoundrel Lu is truly formidable. After a few moves, we are now at a great disadvantage again. Hei! Has Tian Dan been killed?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head.

Li Si's eyes brightened and he said excitedly, "This is greatly beneficial to Great Qin's future plans to unify the world. And Lu Buwei can no longer count on his mutual support to

control the six Eastern states."

Xiang Shalong seized the opportunity to ask, "Besides the military's Meng Ao and Wang Chi, what kind of strength does Lu Buwei have?"

Li Si replied forlornly, "Lu Buwei has comparatively weak troops-wise. At least within Xianyang, our strength is superior to his."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his eyebrows and said, "I am unfamiliar with the court process, can Brother Li explain its ins and outs to me?"

Li Si looked at him in shock for a while before nodding his head and saying, "If you need a detailed explanation, I am afraid that Official Xiang will not be able to return home tonight. At a high level however, there are three levels in the hierarchy. At the top is naturally the Crown Prince together with supporting minor officials like me. We form the inner court. Hei! Just the inner court is extremely complex."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "I am actually familiar with the inner court. Brother Li does not need to explain. Under the Crown Prince is the Right Premier and Left Premier. What is the difference in authority between the two?"

Li Si patiently explained, "To answer this, we need to start with Shang Yang's political reforms during the time of Duke Xiao. Then, the two highest officials under the monarch were the Commons Chief and the Grand Vizier<sup>7</sup>. Until King Huiwen

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<sup>7</sup> The Grand Vizier is supposed to be the highest official position in the Qin state.

came, Shang Yang held both positions, effectively unifying the control of the military and civil government in one person. His achievements were spectacular, arousing even the jealousy of his master King Huiwen who finally executed him through dismemberment by horses. From then on, power was concentrated in the King. The civil government and military was separated, with a Premier installed to manage the former and a Great General to command the latter. The Premier headed hundreds of officials. The administrative load on him became too heavy and the post was divided into the Left and Right Premiers, with the Right Premier managing the civil government and the Left Premier managing military affairs. The former was akin to the previous Commons Chief and the latter akin to the Grand Vizier."

The more Xiang Shaolong listened, the more confused he got. He asked, "If that is so, why is Lu Buwei so insistent on controlling the military?"

Li Si laughed bitterly and replied, "It has always been difficult to separate the civil government and the military. Since both the Left and Right Premiers report directly to the King, whenever there is a decision to be made by the King, both Premiers must be consulted. Now with the Crown Prince still young and the Empress Dowager personally holding court. The situation is even more complex."

Xiang Shaolong felt even more confused and frowned, asking, "In that case, how do these two Premiers operate?"



Li Si languidly replied, "The Left and Right Premiers govern the country though the four institutions. The four institutions are the Army and Government, the Judiciary, the Tax Authority and Public Works. They are controlled by the four cabinet ministers, the Minister of War, Minister of Justice, Minister of Education and Minister of the Sky. Presently the Left Premier manages the Military and Public Works while the Right Premier manages the Judiciary and Tax Authority. Lu Gong was originally the Minister of War. This position is now glaringly vacant."

Xiang Shaolong was about to query some more when an inner palace attendant arrived outside the hall, greeted and announced, "The Empress Dowager requests the pleasure of seeing Official Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong and Li Si glanced at each other, both realizing something was wrong.

Thick snow started floating down at this moment.

Inside the Empress Dowager's inner palace, Zhu Ji was sitting high atop the phoenix dais. Four palace maids and four servants stood at her left and right. Palace guards lined up on both sides up to the entrance of the palace hall.

The moment Xiang Shaolong saw this troop arrangement, he knew that he was at a disadvantage. This is because Zhu Ji is clearly indicating that she did not want to engage in private conversation. She is also indicating that her heart is with Lao Ai, since she is demonstrating that she does not want to meet him alone, avoiding Lao Ai's jealousy.

Indeed, after Xiang Shaolong had paid his respects and recovered, Zhu Ji looked at him with chilly eyes and coldly said, "Official Xiang, are you disregarding me the Empress Dowager? Returning after half a year, you do not even meet me for a greeting."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the only effective move was to use the soft to overcome the hard. He sighed and said, "Empress Dowager, please calm down. The reason....."

Zhu Ji interrupted him, saying, "No matter what you say, I am not going to calm down. Xiang Shaolong, tell me what you and Crown Prince are stirring. You are so secretive and sneaky in everything, keeping me in the dark. When Lord Gaoling rebelled during the hunt, you clearly had prior information. Why didn't you inform me?"

At this point Xiang Shaolong knew she was merely sore about an old issue, so he laughed bitterly and said, "This minor official has a thousand things to say, but finds it difficult to say a word with so many ears listening. Is it right for me to speak so freely of the Late King or the Crown Prince or Premier Lu or Premier Xu?"

Zhu Ji's beautiful eyes gazed at him deeply for a time. She then softened and heaved a sigh, saying, "Alright! Everyone please get out. Anyone who dares to eavesdrop is to be killed without mercy."

In the blink of an eye, all the servants and guards had cleared out of the hall, even closing the palace hall door and all the side doors.

The Zhu Ji who was sitting on the phoenix seat heaved another sigh and with a softened voice said, "I already knew it was impossible to corner you. Speak!"

Xiang Shaolong took two steps forward and bracing himself, sat on the steps of the dais. He blandly said, "Lu Buwei killed Xu Xian and harmed Lu Gong. If he is able to kill me, the next will be Official Lao."

Zhu Ji saw that he was actually so rude as to sit on the steps of the dais on his own accord. She had wanted to reprimand him, but was overwhelmed by his startling words. She shook dramatically, saying, "What did you say?"

Xiang Shaolong buried his head in his palms and said solemnly, "Any obstacle in Lu Buwei's path to power will be kicked away by him sooner or later. He can sacrifice anyone and anything other than himself. Empress Dowager should understand this even better than I do."

Zhu Ji's breathing became heavy and only said after a long while, "The Chu people have sent the severed head of Lord Chunshen over, begging for forgiveness over Xu Xian's death. What does this have to do with Lu Buwei? If you do not make yourself clear, I will not spare you."

Xiang Shaolong became furious and whipped his body around sharply, staring at Zhu Ji. He said, "What did Lord Chunshen stand to gain by killing Xu Xian? If not for Tian Dan's instigation and Lu Buwei's background support, even if there was much to benefit from it, would the Chu people be so audacious? Heng! You will not spare me? Just get

someone to come and behead me then. See if I Xiang Shaolong will crease half a hair on my eyebrow."

Zhu Ji's eyes emitted an intensely cold killing aura, but after contending a time with his gaze, she was defeated. She lowered her gaze and lightly said, "Just take it as if my words were too extreme. What's the use of getting so angry?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that it was a good chance to back down, but decided to vent his anger anyway. He said forcefully, "The position of Left Premier is now being coveted by everyone. If it falls onto Lu Buwei's hands, not only will I Xiang Shaolong die without a proper burial, the person beside Empress Dowager will not live to his old age."

Zhu Ji gently said, "If Shaolong is willing to be the Left Premier, I will support him with all my power."

Xiang Shaolong regained his calm and smiled while shaking his head, saying, "It is not for me, but for Lord Changping."

Zhu Ji was startled and objected, "How would the people accept Lord Changping? Why don't you consider Wang Ling?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "This is because we need Wang Ling to replace Lu Gong in managing the Army, to better master Wang Chi, Meng Ao, Du Bi and their men. Even though Lord Changping is a little lacking in virtue and seniority, he is still a scion of the royal family. Appointing him as Premier is the best way to pacify the hearts of Great Qin's military. Empress Dowager should remember that two of the three tiger generals of Western Qin have gone. The remaining one

Wang Chi is not only leaning towards Lu Buwei, his standing is still below that of Meng Ao. Now everyone is currying favor with Lu Buwei. When everyone has fallen in with him, will Empress Dowager and Crown Prince have a place to stand?"

Zhu Ji stared at him for a while before saying forlornly, "Why can't I ever prevail over you? But this is no small matter. I need to mull on this. Please retire first!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that she was going to discuss this with Lao Ai and cringed in his heart. Still, he could not do a thing and left in frustration.

## CHAPTER 2

## Block And Counter

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

LAO AI'S residence is beside the palace. Just across and looking as magnificent as a mini-palace is Lu Buwei's new den of thieves. The outer wall is tall and thick and the entrance is framed by thirty-foot high stone archway. The three large words 'Premier Mentor's Residence' were inscribed in stone. This brazen act of strife with the King's prestige is enough to arouse the kind of jealousy that King Huiwen had for Shang Yang. Provoking the jealousy of Xiao Pan the future Qin Shihuang will undoubtedly be his

downfall, it is just a pity that that will only happen in six years.

To endure and survive this six bitter and treacherous years, he would have to feign humility and friendship with the crafty Lao Ai.

In that movie about Qin Shihuang, Zhu Ji finally stands completely on Lao Ai's side, not only opposing Lu Buwei but also secretly plotting the overthrow of her son Yin Zheng.

The movie's explanation was grossly simplified, attributing it all to Zhu Ji's infatuation with Lao Ai.

But Xiang Shaolong knew that there were at least two other reasons. The first reason was her unrequited love for Xiao Pan and himself turning into hate.

The other reason is even more complicated.

Xiang Shaolong was actually abiding by the irresistible will of fate. That is why he deliberately allowed Zhu Ji to succumb increasingly and more inextricably into Lao Ai's lustful manipulation.

Because he felt guilty, and also knew that Zhu Ji was no longer able to leave Lao Ai, he subconsciously alienated himself from her, increasing her hatred for him. That is how things have ended up this way today.

Xiao Pan had always looked up to Zhu Ji as his mother, taking her as a natural replacement for Madam Ni. Thus he had also wished that she would remain chaste like Madam Ni. In the depths of his heart, other than King Zhuangxiang, he

could only accept Xiang Shaolong as his father. Zhu Ji's standing in his eyes has taken a tumble since she became attached to the disreputable Lao Ai, seeming to have lost her self respect. This disappointment caused more than a minor change in his attitude, it has in fact has turned into an intense loathing and hatred. This is in turn causing their relationship to become increasingly vile.

Under these circumstances, Zhu Ji naturally leaned closer to Lao Ai and Lu Buwei.

It seemed to her as if Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were colluding against her.

This is a situation and a fact that nobody can change.

Xiang Shaolong's only resort was to incite conflict between Lao Ai and Lu Buwei, causing Zhu Ji to support only Lao Ai and not Lu Buwei.

He arrived at Lao Ai's inner residence and reported his name. Lao Ai received the news and happily came out to welcome him.

This scoundrel with the heart of a beast was decked in court dress, looking rejuvenated and in high spirits. While he was still at a distance, he smiled and greeted, "The news is that Official Xiang has returned from his long journey. I was just thinking of visiting to pay my respects. Who would have guessed that the Official would honor us with a visit. How could the lesser official bear this?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed his mother because she gave



birth to such a heartless thief. But of course he managed his expression carefully and went up to meet up. He pulled his arm and laughed, saying, "I just met Empress Dowager and the Crown Prince and found out that so much has happened in Xianyang. Come! Let us find a place to have a heart to heart chat."

Lao Ai clearly knew about his meeting with the Empress Dowager and indifferently led him into the East room. Along the way, he saw numerous maids and household warriors. His grandeur seemed to be rising.

After they had sat down and had a cup of fragrant tea, with the maids had withdrawn, Lao Ai said, "What confidential matter did Empress Dowager and Official Xiang discuss?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he was most jealous of the unrequited feelings that Zhu Ji had for him. If he could not allay his suspicion, he could forget about corporation. He whispered, "I told Empress Dowager that Xu Xian was killed by Lord Chunshen under orders from Lu Buwei."

Lao Ai looked at him in shock.

Xiang Shaolong explained concisely and exclaimed again, "If the post of Left Premier falls into the hands of Lu Buwei's men, even the Crown Prince and Empress Dowager will have no choice but to be led by the nose."

Lao Ai was stumped for words and started contemplating.

This was Xiang Shaolong's brilliance. Truth be told, Lao Ai had large ambitions. And his only means was to rely on Zhu

Ji.

If Zhu Ji loses power, not only would his own per wane, he would have to return to living on Lu Buwei's grace.

Human beings were thus. Before tasting the sweetness, all is good. But after tasting the sweetness, it would be hard to give it up. If Lao Ai had to return to being Lu Buwei's slave, it would be more unbearable than killing him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "If I guessed correctly, Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie must have exhausted all means to win Official Lao over, just like how he won me over previously."

Lao Ai glanced at him and asked, "Please forgive the Lao's query, but why did Official Xiang favour me from the beginning?"

Xiang Shaolong squeezed out his most earnest expression and replied, "I can reveal this matter only to Brother Lao alone. The reason is the Empress Dowager. Crown Prince and I did not want her to feel lonely, plus I have always been fond of Brother Lao. Brother Lao should understand my intentions now!"

Lao Ai couldn't help asking, "Is Brother Xiang wishing that I will support your appointment as Left Premier?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed him for projecting his petty thinking onto the noble intentions of others. He forced an expression as if he did not want to be misunderstood and angrily replied, "If I had wanted to be Left Premier, I would

have been while the Late King was still around. Brother Lao should know about this matter right?"

Of course Lao Ai knew about this and he hurriedly apologized, "Brother Xiang, please do not misunderstand. I was just thinking that apart from you, who else would be qualified to contend with Wang Wan?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he had been moved, and heaving a sigh, he said, "Please allow me to change the topic for a while. It is said that 'men are not grass and trees, how can they be emotionless?'. I, Xiang Shaolong, personally brought the Empress Dowager and Crown Prince to Qin. I had originally intended to return to obscurity then to enjoy a peaceful rural life with my lovely wives and beautiful maids. This is truly my dream. How was I to know that this old scoundrel Lu Buwei repeatedly tried to kill me, even causing my wife and maids to die tragically. This is why I want to fight Lu Buwei to the end. The day the Lu scoundrel is killed will also be the day I Xiang Shaolong leave Qin. If this is not the case, may heaven exterminate me. Does Brother Lao understand my intent now?"

Lao Ai stared at him for a moment before stretching his hand and saying, "I understand!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he had been thoroughly moved and stretched out his own hand for the handshake. He then solemnly said, "Lord Changping to be the Left Premier, Wang Ling to replace Lu Gong. Does Brother Lao agree?"

Lao Ai exclaimed hoarsely, "What?!"

After Xiang Shaolong left Lao Ai's residence, he led the eighteen guardians to the heavily guarded guest house of Prince Dan. More than ten of the city guards immediately blocked the route to the entrance. The leading city guard captain saluted and said, "Official Guan has ordered that nobody is to enter the house."

Xiang Shaolong glanced at him sideways and barked, "You've seen me Xiang Shaolong yet you dare to obstruct me so rudely. What is your name?"

That guard captain knew then and there that he was in big trouble. He knelt down in fright and pleaded, "Your humble servant knows his guilt! Your humble servant knows his guilt! For a moment I did not see clearly that it was Commander Xiang."

It could be said that, there was no one in Xianyang at present who did not know that Xiang Shaolong was the anointed man closest to the Crown Prince. If he wanted to act against some small fry, even Lu Buwei would not be able to prevent it. The guards were so frightened that they all knelt down.

How would Xiang Shaolong trifle with them? He shouted coldly, "Open the door for me!"

How would the guards dare to object? They obediently opened the gate. It turned out that there was another group of guards encamped in the square within the residence.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse and instructed his guardians to keep watch at the gate. He then swaggered into

the residence with high and mighty steps. The city guards were intimidated by his mighty aura and dared not utter a word.

There were more than ten of Prince Dan's experts inside, including the Great General Xu Yize, Minister-of-State Leng Ting, Division Commander You Zhi, and the Yan Du who was defeated by Guan Zhongxie. When they heard his voice, they went to the residence gate to welcome him.

When they saw Xiang Shaolong, they all had an expression of grief and indignation.

After they had reached the main hall and sat down, Xu Yize indignantly said, "Official Xiang must arbitrate for us."

You Zi was the cool-headed one. He asked, "Did you manage to dispose of Tian Dan?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in affirmation.

Xu Yize and the rest all breathed a little easier.

Truth be told, if Tian Dan was still alive, Yan would be in mortal danger.

Leng Ting heaved a sigh and said, "How could anyone predict that Lu Buwei would dare to defy public opinion and detain the Crown Prince (Dan). We do not know if Crown Prince (Dan) is alive or dead so we dare not act. Else even if we are all killed in battle, we will want to vent our anger."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Gentlemen, please be at ease. Even if one day Lu Buwei grew some balls, he would not dare to

injure the Crown Prince (Dan). Else he would have broken faith with the world. I think he has just promised to detain Crown Prince (Dan) for a time to allow the devil Tian Dan to satisfy his wicked desires! Leave this matter to me. If I cannot openly compel him to release Crown Prince (Dan), I will rescue him in secret. Alright! Please pack your belongings and come to my residence. The Lu thief will have to release Crown Prince (Dan), but may turn to murdering all of you instead. That would be a disaster."

Xu Yize saw that Xiang Shaolong was loyal and righteous without regard for Lu Buwei. He couldn't help but be moved and ordered his men to pack their items immediately.

In a short while, more than a hundred people had assembled in the parade square. The city guards in charge looked on helplessly. Nobody dared to interfere.

At this moment, the sound of hoofbeats arrived. A company of men and horses galloped in from the main gate. They were led by Guan Zhongxie.

His expression was chilly. He quickly dismounted and came up to Xiang Shaolong. In a bold and self-righteous tone, he said, "Official Xiang please wait. Your subordinate has been ordered by the Premier Mentor to forbid the occupants of the residence from stepping past the gate."

Xu Yize and the rest all drew their swords. Under the reflection of the blades, the tension mounted.

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud and said, "Could I ask if Official Guan has any official document signed by the

Premier Mentor or any such thing?"

Guan Zhongxie was stumped on the spot.

As soon as he had received the news from his subordinates that Xiang Shaolong had run the barricade, he had rushed over from the command building immediately. He could not have had the opportunity to meet with Lu Buwei. He said forcefully, "Subordinate has received Premier Mentor's verbal orders. If Official Xiang does not believe me, he may inquire of Premier Mentor personally."

Xiang Shaolong drew his sword with a "Qiang" sound. He laughed and said, "Then I also have Crown Prince's verbal orders to come here to retrieve the people. If Official Guan does not believe me, he can inquire of the Crown Prince personally. If anyone dares to hinder me, he is disobeying the King's order. I will kill without mercy."

All the guardians drew their swords as one, tightly encircling Guan Zhongxie and his ten plus bodyguards.

Guan Zhongxie's expression changed slightly, knowing that if he said anything more in contradiction, blood would be drawn then and there.

He looked at his underlings on the outside. Their faces were pale as clay and they were keeping quiet out of fear. For sure if a fight broke out, none of them would dare to get involved.

He then looked at Xiang Shaolong and saw the murderous spirit in his eyes. It was clear that Xiang Shaolong intended

to use this opportunity to eliminate him. 'A gentleman does not mind backing down for a while to achieve a larger purpose'. He smiled and retreated to one side, flatly saying, "Official Xiang has misunderstood. Subordinate was just afraid that the Official has just returned from afar and does not know the present situation. Since this is the case, we'll let Premier Mentor take this up with the Crown Prince then. Official, please!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented that was a pity and sheathed his sword. He smiled and said, "That would be the best. I had thought that Official Guan was disobedient even to the Crown Prince, being loyal only to the Premier Mentor."

Guan Zhongxie felt a stab of fear, recalling that Lu Buwei's greatest weakness was that ultimately he was not the Qin King. That is why as long as the Qin Crown Prince had Xiang Shaolong's backing, he had to obey the King's orders unless he chose to rebel openly.

Xu Yize and all the guardians sheathed their swords and mounted their horses.

Xiang Shaolong did not even spare Guan Zhongxie a glance, leading everyone out through the gates. He suddenly thought of a contingency, and after instructing Wu Shu to bring Xu Yize and the rest back to the Wu residence, headed for the palace immediately with his men. When he entered the inner courtyard, he found Xiao Pan discussing court business with Li Si. He greeted and said, "If Crown Prince



wishes to demolish the Lu thief's prestige and increase your monarchical power, a golden opportunity is before you."

Xiao Pan and Li Si were astonished, both looking at each other.

As the Crown Prince commanded for the inspection tour to proceed, more than a hundred mounted guards set forth, clearing the way for him. Lord Changwen, Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong and Li Si formed up at the Crown Prince's front, back, left and right. More than three hundred men and horses galloped out of the palace in splendor and might, heading towards the Premier Mentor's residence.

At this moment, Lu Buwei was furiously rushing out of the Premier Mentor's residence as he had just been informed by Guan Zhongxie of Xiang Shaolong's rescue of Prince Dan's men. He was going to the palace to get Zhu Ji to call Xiang Shaolong to account. How was he to know that he would meet the sovereign en route.

Guan Zhongxie and the rest hurriedly moved to the side and knelt down. Only Lu Buwei urged his horse forward to Xiao Pan's front. After greeting Xiao Pan, he first gave Xiang Shaolong a glance before gravely asking, "Where is Crown Prince going for his inspection tour and why?"

Xiao Pan secretly cursed him, Since when is it your turn to mind my business? Nonetheless he maintained an unhurried expression on the surface and replied, "I was just going to the Premier Mentor's residence."

Lu Buwei replied in shock, "Why is Crown Prince looking for

the old official?"

Xiao Pan blandly replied, "It is said that Prince Dan has gone to Premier Mentor's residence and is lingering there. I have a sudden urge to meet him. Will Premier Mentor please arrange a meeting between us immediately."

Lu Buwei stared foolishly for a while before his eyes betrayed a cold murderous look. He coldly said, "Prince Dan had expressed a desire to leave over the past few days. I do not know if he is still within the old official's residence."

He turned his head towards the kneeling Guan Zhongxie and shouted loudly, "Commander Guan, why haven't you quickly gone and checked it out for the Crown Prince?"

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong exchanged a glance before the former sneered, "Premier Mentor's words are strange. Don't you even know if someone is at your residence? To be sure, Prince Dan has arrived from afar to offer sacrifices to the Late King. He is our Great Qin's honored guest. If our hospitality is not satisfactory, even I have to bear some responsibility."

He then shouted, "Changping, Changwen! The two of you will accompany Official Guan to verify the outcome!"

Lu Buwei did not imagine that after Xiang Shaolong returned, Xiao Pan would turn into a completely different person. Not only did he not abide by his wishes, he seemed to be putting him down at every point. While he was still dumbstruck, Lord Changping and Lord Changwen had clasped Guan Zhongxie between them and left.

Xiao Pan nudged his horse's belly and rode towards the Premier Mentor's residence. The large contingent of men and horses continued forward. Lu Buwei could only follow at Xiao Pan's side.

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan and Li Si were all laughing in their hearts. Lu Buwei's greatest disadvantage this time was that he had no logic to stand on. That was why it was best for him to remain mute and swallow the bitter medicine, keeping his pain to himself.

All the citizens stopped and bowed on the streetside at the sight of the Crown Prince on his inspection tour. All paid obeisance to this youthful heir-apparent whose martial prowess was rising with each day.

Before they had reached the Premier Mentor's residence, both Lords Changping and Changwen had come out with a pale Prince Dan in between.

Xiao Pan urged his horse forward and laughed loudly, saying, "Prince Dan, how are you doing? Will the Prince please generously excuse our poor hospitality and forgive us our multitude of mistakes!"

When Prince Dan saw Xiang Shaolong, how could he not know what was happening? After he said a few polite words, he turned to the ashen-faced Lu Buwei and said, "One of these days, I will definitely repay the Premier Mentor for this half a year of hospitality."

Lu Buwei knew that he was speaking in irony and coldly snorted without replying. He could not even be bothered to

put up an act at this point.

Xiao Pan turned to Lu Buwei and said, "Wasn't Premier Mentor going to the palace? Was it to meet the Empress Dowager or myself?"

Lu Buwei was almost shocked to silence. Who would have thought that Xiao Pan would be so formidable. If he had said that he wanted to meet with Zhu Ji, it would clearly show that he wanted to mess with the Crown Prince in front of her. If he said he wanted to meet him instead, what else was there to say? He awkwardly said, "The old official merely wanted to discuss the candidates for the posts of Left Premier and Minister of War with Crown Prince and Empress Dowager!"

Xiao Pan coldly said, "I have made my decision. It will be announced during morning court tomorrow. This matter need not be discussed further. Premier Mentor, please!"

Lu Buwei looked at Xiang Shaolong in shock.

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and without saying anything, displayed a look of profound mystery. He secretly laughed that Lu Buwei has finally experienced the domineering and oppressive air of this future Qin Shihuang.

As Lu Buwei was fuming over this, Xiao Pan ordered, "I just remembered something. I am not able to stay for long. Official Xiang will entertain Prince Dan properly on my behalf. I wish to return to the palace."

He nudged his horse and left.

Lord Changping, Lord Changwen, Li Si and the rest hurriedly followed.

Xiang Shaolong saw Lu Buwei staring at Xiao Pan's back in a daze and he said indifferently, "Premier Mentor, please! This General will now retire!"

Ignoring Lu Buwei, he led Prince Dan and all the guardians away. He knew that this incident marked the start of his open war with Lu Buwei. There would be no other option.

They passed by Qin Qing's residence on the way back to the Wu residence. He almost wanted to slip in for a tryst with this beautiful widow. Nonetheless he had Prince Dan at his side, and Madam Ya, Wu Tingfang and the rest were also hanging on for his return. It was best for him to suppress this urge.

## CHAPTER 3

## A Final Farewell

[Translated by YEONGWEE]

XIANG SHAOLONG returned to the Wu residence with Prince Dan. Even in their wildest dreams, Xu Yize and his party could not imagine that their master would be rescued in such a short time. They were all celebrating madly and grateful to tears. Xiang Shaolong was worried about Zhao Ya, Wu Tingfang, Bao'er and the rest, and so handed the task of entertaining Prince Dan to Tao Fang and Teng Yi with an apology. He hurriedly walked towards the inner residence. The servants and maids he met were all excited at his return

and greeted him respectfully.

As he walked through the winding covered walkways around the garden, he heard a male and female voice in conversation from the little pavilion behind a bamboo grove. Nonetheless he could not make out who they were.

He did not have the mood to investigate and kept walking. As his footsteps sounded, a woman's voice called out delicately from the bamboo grove, "Master is back!"

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and looked over. Turns out it was Zhou Wei. Her face was fuller, perhaps because of the comfortable life here. This caused her to be even more enchanting than before. She prostrated herself on the ground, her face blushing awkwardly with a flustered expression.

As Xiang Shaolong was wondering who she was talking to, a shadow flashed by and the Wu Guo who had brought Zhao Ya back from Daliang came out after her from the bamboo grove. He even called out, "Little Wei you! Oh! Master Xiang! Your servant! Hei!"

He knelt down beside Zhou Wei, his expression also awkward and embarrassed.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized, figuring that Wu Guo this rascal had fallen for Zhou Wei and was currently putting in effort to woo her.

While he had once encouraged Jing Jun to pursue her, it seems that Jing Jun had turned his sights to Lu Dan'er. That

is why he has allowed Wu Guo this lovable little rascal to plot his amorous pursuit. He was most happy.

Zhou Wei saw that Wu Guo was almost touching her shoulder to shoulder as he knelt down. She glared at Wu Guo before fretfully saying, "Master, Little Wei."

Xiang Shaolong hurried forward and helped the two of them up, happily saying, "Little Wei need not explain. Seeing the two of you together, I have only happiness. How could I blame you for anything?"

Zhou Wei's pretty face blushed a deep red and she hung her head, saying, "Master, its not like that!"

Xiang Shaolong noticed that she did not dare to look at him as she spoke, how could he not understand that she did indeed have some affection for Wu Guo. As he was about to speak, Wu Guo jumped up and in the midst of joyous shouting flipped a somersault before grabbing Zhou Wei's jade arms and shaking it, saying, "Little Wei, what I said was correct, wasn't it! Master Xiang will not blame us for sure."

Zhou Wei shook free of his grasp and angrily scolded him, "Get lost for me. I need to attend to Master."

Xiang Shaolong chortled a laugh and said, "Little Wei does not have to wait on me any longer. From today onwards, let Wu Guo serve you!"

The moment he finished speaking, he raised his steps and walked away, leaving Wu Guo to bandy with Zhou Wei.

As he was about to reach the rear residence, the two maids



Tian Zhen and Tian Feng rushed out in in a gust of fragrant wind. They threw themselves into his embrace and cried tears of joy, looking like two beautifully trembling little birds.

Xiang Shaolong embraced the two of them tightly and entered the hall.

Wu Tingfang was having a heart-to-heart chat with Ji Yanran. The soon to be three year old Xiang Bao'er nestled in the latter's bosom.

When Wu Tingfang saw Xiang Shaolong, she forgot everything else, jumped up and pounced onto him.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the Tian Sisters and hugged her in a full embrace.

Wu Tingfang cried and complained to him at the same time, "This person you! Only now are you willing to return home."

As Xiang Shaolong laughed and teased her, Ji Yanran carried Xiang Bao'er over and placed him in the crook of his arm.

Xiang Bao'er held on to his neck, his clear boyish voice calling out, "Daddy!"

Xiang Shaolong was so happy that he rained kisses on his small face, his heart filled to the brim with the warmth of family affection.

Ji Yanran laughed and said, "Enough! Quickly go into the room to see Sister Ya! She should be awake by now."

Xiang Shaolong knew that Zhao Ya did not have the habit of taking afternoon naps and he jolted, asking, "How is Ya'er?"

Ji Yanran's expression turned dark and she said, "Her body is very weak. Quickly go see her! She has been waiting for you bitterly."

Xiang Shaolong returned Xiang Bao'er to Ji Yanran and smoothly asked, "Where is Zhi Zhi and Sister Rou?"

Wu Tingfang happily replied, "The three sisters are together and have no attention for anything else at the moment."

After Xiang Shaolong kissed Wu Tingfang's cheeks again, the Tian Sisters clasped him in between themselves and dragged him excitedly towards the East wing.

They entered a particularly quiet and secluded room. Zhao Ya had not awakened yet. A pretty maid was at her side nursing her.

The Tian Sisters judiciously dragged away that pretty maid. He was left alone with Zhao Ya. He sat on the edge of the couch, a heated love igniting in his heart. He carefully examined this tragic beauty.

Zhao Ya has obviously wasted away and her appearance was wan and unhealthy. She was missing the brightness and color of her former days, and had taken on a thin and delicate look instead. As he saw this, his heart was pained.

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hands to caress her cheeks and painfully called out, "Ya'er! Ya'er!"

Zhao Ya slowly woke up. Opening her eyes, she saw that it was Xiang Shaolong and with a delicate moan, she struggled to sit up.

Xiang Shaolong embraced her into his bosom and kissed her fragrant lips deeply.

Zhao Ya used a hidden burst of energy and wrapped him up tightly like a parcel, giving him a warm and full response. She then raised her pretty face and laughed saying, "My man is finally back. Oh! Why are you crying? Even I am not crying!"

Xiang Shaolong fell on the bed and they fell asleep in mutual embrace, face to face and with one hand caressing her arousing body. He sighed, "Ya'er, you've lost weight!"

Zhao Ya kissed the tip of his nose and happily said, "I have already given consideration to your pair of naughty hands and have been forcing myself to eat something everyday. Are you still blaming me? Wu! Remember, you are not to bring up our old grudges, not even one word."

Xiang Shaolong saw her beautiful eyes ripple with splendor and was secretly delighted, saying, "Ya'er, you must recover and accompany me for for a scenic tour, enjoy the pleasures of life without holding back."

Zhao Ya smiled and said, "My illness is incurable. But as long as I am able to spend my last days with my most beloved, Heaven does not owe me Zhao Ya anything anymore."

An intensely ominous feeling welled up in him and he reproached her saying, "I forbid you from saying such things. You are sure to recover completely. My love to you is the world's best miracle cure, stronger than any grand doctor."

Zhao Ya giggled and her pretty face twinkled. She gave him

another kiss before saying, "Please help me up. I've sleep till I'm tired to death."

Xiang Shaolong actually could not bear to leave this comfortable slumber inducing couch, but did not have a choice but to cradle her up by the waist and sitting up on the couch.

Zhao Ya strove to hold on to his neck, and said weakly, "How about going out for a walk? Look! Its snowing!"

Xiang Shaolong looked out the window. Snowflakes were indeed floating down. He couldn't bear to deny her and finding a cloak and a thick cape, wrapped her up tightly before supporting her towards the small pavilion in the courtyard. He helped her onto a stone bench and said in sympathetic love, "Is Ya'er uncomfortable anywhere?"

Zhao Ya pasted herself onto his cheeks and looked at the snow covered landscape outside the pavilion. She smiled and said, "Are you talking about the past? I feel completely devoid of energy. I will feel dizzy whether sitting or standing. Sometimes when I think of you, my heart will ache. But everything is alright now. I even feel like eating something!"

Xiang Shaolong leaned away and asked, "Should I get someone to prepare some food for you? What would you like to eat?"

Zhao Ya's eyes emitted a passion deep as the sea, and with a smile on her face, she shook her head saying, "No! That was just a feeling. Right now I just want you to hold on to Ya'er. Let Ya'er know that Xiang Shaolong still loves her so. Ya'er is

already very contented."

Xiang Shaolong carefully examined her countenance and saw that her face had turned red. Her elegant eyes twinkled with a fantastic and stunning expression. The color and brightness she had lost had reappeared on her silken face. He was delighted and momentarily speechless.

Zhao Ya gently said, "Zhao Da and the rest have been loyal and devoted to me. Can you find something appropriate for them? They will now serve you! Because of me, they have all abstained from marrying and setting up a family. It is now up to you to help Ya'er fulfill this wish."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong realize that something is very wrong. He shook severely and said, "You are now allowed to say such things. You will recover very quickly."

Zhao Ya laughed dully, "Look! This great snow is so beautiful, purifying all the ugly and hateful things in this world of men. Even though Ya'er has had many men, but the only one she has truly loved is Shaolong. All the others have been forgotten. I should have died in Daliang long ago. But knowing that I still have a chance to meet you, I held on until now. If you had not called to me just now, I might not have woken up again. Shaolong Ah! Don't cry, ok?"

Reaching out her sleeves, she wiped his tears.

Xiang Shaolong's whole body turned cold, his heart feeling as if it had been sliced by a knife and his guts feeling as if they had been cut short. He said in a trembling voice, "Ya'er, don't scare me. You must press on. This world still holds

many wonderful things, awaiting your enjoyment."

Zhao Ya smiled and with a voice as soft as water, she said, "Beautiful things are always short-lived. I still remember meeting you for the first time on the street in Handan. Then your clothes were ragged and you had a down and out appearance. But you had that bright, valiant and brave disposition that made you prouder than any aristocrat, causing Ya'er to be unable to suppress the passion in her heart."

Pausing, her eyes emitted an unsurpassed red-hot expression. She lightly moaned, "'When the golden wind meets the jade outdoors, it is better than countless moments in man's world'<sup>8</sup>. Do you remember saying these two beautiful sentences of poetry in my little house? Those were the most beautiful words of endearment Ya'er has ever heard in her life. It was because of these two sentences that I forced myself to stay in Daliang. But in the end I could not help but come to see you."

She then held on to him desperately saying, "Shaolong ah, you are Zhao Ya's drop of honey! Please kiss me ok?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart was shattered, and in the midst of his broken and dejected spirit, sealed her scorching lips.

Zhao Ya responded with passion, gasping with hurried breaths.

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<sup>8</sup> It is attributed to a Qin dynasty official and means something like, If two people who love each other run into each other, even though their time is short, it is to be treasured and is better than countless beautiful moments in the world. [Reference from <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/20626276>]

She then collapsed into Xiang Shaolong's bosom, her lips turning cold.

Only after Xiang Shaolong parted from her lips in shock did he realize that she had stopped breathing.

However, the corners of her mouth betrayed an expression of happiness and satisfaction. Her eyes were lightly closed, looking as if she had just fallen into a deep sleep.

But he knew that she would never awaken again. The reason she was able to survive till today was because she was vigorously striving to see him one last time! With Zhao Ya's death, Xiang Shaolong also felt his past in Handan buried in the current of time.

The three Zhao beauties with whom he had relations had all passed away one after the other. Every incident was a great blow to him. By this time, he had become numb.

He was truly exhausted emotionally.

He had seen the death of Lu Gong and Zhao Ya in a single day. And both had happened so suddenly that he could no longer bear the mental and physical torment. After he handed Zhao Ya's body to Tao Fang to manage, he followed Zhao Ya's last wishes to comfort Zhao Da and the rest. After that, he could endure no more and hid in his room crying bitterly before falling into a deep sleep.

When he awakened, he found Wu Tingfang curled up and asleep in his embrace. He hurriedly woke her and cleaned himself up before rushing towards the palace.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the eighteen guardians guarded his procession.

His conflict with Lu Buwei was getting more intense and there was danger of assassination at any time. That is why they were extremely careful where ever they went.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is attending court.

Under normal circumstances, a city defense official like him would never have had the opportunity to attend morning court. Fortunately, Xiang Shaolong's other position was Grand Tutor. According to tradition, before the Crown Prince had come of age and with the special permission of the emperor himself, the Grand Tutor could attend court meetings. The moment he stepped through the palace gates, the two brothers Lord Changping and Lord Changwen cut Xiang Shaolong off and pulled him aside to talk.

The two of them were both alarmed and glad, apparently having heard of Lord Changping's candidacy for the position of Left Premier under his instigation.

As everyone dismounted, Lord Changping laughed bitterly and said, "I do not know whether to thank you or to punch you. Crown Prince sought me out late last night to tell me that you had recommended me to replace Premier Xu. Ai, why are you unwilling to take it on yourself? If you are willing to be Left Premier, all of us will support you heart and soul."

Lord Changwen was even a little suspicious and said, "When elder brother has made a mess of things, it would be



obtaining disaster from a blessing."

Teng Yi laughed and said, "These two chaps are usually unafraid of heaven and hell. Unexpectedly they are now afraid of promotion and wealth. Anyone who sees this will be laughing away."

Jing Jun laughed till his belly ached, saying, "The Crown Prince and us will be in the background holding you up. Even if you meet something impossible just act as normal. Whats the worst that could happen?"

Lord Changping angrily said, "Its easy for all of you to speak. Lu Buwei's power spans the court and commoners, everyone is currying his favor, falling over each other to flatter him and speaking his words. Shaolong, you hide away on the side while asking me to oppose him openly. Will I have anymore peace and happiness in the future?"

Xiang Shaolong embraced his shoulders and blandly said, "Before heaven bestows a heavy responsibility on a person, he must first... Hei! something about bitterness of the heart<sup>9</sup>. Don't worry! Li Si is at the back to help you plan and decide. Lu Buwei has also lost Mo Ao. What are you afraid of? Come!

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<sup>9</sup> XSL was starting to quote a saying from Mencius but gave up halfway because he could not remember the rest of it. Maybe Huang Yi himself couldn't be bothered to look it up in its entirety too. For those interested, the saying is

天降大任于斯人也，必先苦其心志，劳其筋骨，饿其体肤，  
空乏其身，行指乱其所为，所以动心忍性，曾益其所不能'.

It roughly translates to, Before heaven bestows a heavy responsibility on a person, the person must first suffer bitterness of the heart, toil of the muscles and bones, hunger of the stomach, till the emaciation of his body and upheaval of his life, thereby building his endurance, broadening his knowledge and developing his capabilities.

[Reference from <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/9592972>]

Let us go in."

Lord Changping was unconvinced and said, "Li Si is so busy with official business, where will he find time to help me?"

Xiang Shaolong signaled a goodbye to Teng Yi and dragged Lord Changping and his brother away.

In the midst of the multitude of prostrating officials, Xiao Pan sat on the King's throne with Zhu Ji to the right on the Empress's seat.

The King's dais was split into two levels. Xiao Pan's personal guards were led by Lord Changping and Lord Changwen and formed a line on the lower level reaching the entrance of the palace hall.

Besides the guards, nobody was allowed to carry arms into the hall.

More than seventy civilian court officials and military generals formed up on the two sides in their tidy court regalia. The right row was headed by Lu Buwei followed by Wang Wan, Cai Zhe, Jia Gongcheng, Lord Yunyang Ying Ao, Lord Yiqu Ying Qi and other civilian court officials. Li Si and Lao Ai were in the seventeenth and eighteenth positions respectively. They could already be counted as fairly high ranking officials.

The other row is headed by Wang Ling, followed by Wang Chi, Meng Ao and Du Bi.

As the Crown Prince's Grand Tutor, Xiang Shaolong was fairly senior and stood just after Du Bi.

Xiao Pan first expressed grief over Lu Gong's death and declared that the funeral would be in seven days and that he would preside over it personally.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that Xiao Pan was calm and unhurried, carrying within him the lofty mettle of the future Qin Shihuang. He was pleased.

Everyone paid obeisance in acknowledgement. Lu Buwei was the first to speak, "Empress Dowager and Crown Prince are wise. Our Great Qin is in troubled times. First was the Eastern region uprising. Next Premier Xu was attacked and murdered within the Wei border. Finally Lu Gong fell ill in worry and anger, and passed away because of this. The sovereign should quickly restore the government and fill the vacancies in order to build a strong state and spread his benevolent rule."

He paused for effect, then continued with a sneer, "Blood debts must be repaid with blood. Else the little kids in the East will think that our Great Qin is incapable!"

Wang Chi shouted in fury, "The Chu people are too much. If they think that they can appease us with Lord Chunshen's severed head and five cantons, they are certainly naive."

All the officials echoed in agreement. The motion had gained vast momentum.

Xiao Pan coldly observed the officials' reactions and said indifferently, "We will put aside the blood debt with Chu for now. There is more to this matter than meets the eye. As for the vacancies left behind by Premier Xu and the

Commander-in-Chief, Empress Dowager and I have discussed this and we have made our decision."

Lu Buwei was shocked and looked towards Zhu Ji. Seeing that she remained indifferent, he knew something was wrong. He gravely said, "Even the Chu people have openly acknowledged their culpability in the murder of Premier Xu. What secret is there? Could Crown Prince please explain."

Xiao Pan replied in displeasure, "Your sovereign has just said to put this matter aside for now, did Premier Mentor not hear it?"

These few words were extremely blunt. Lu Buwei's expression changed a little. Exchanging a look with Wang Chi and Meng Ao, he closed his mouth and kept quiet.

Having lost Zhu Ji's support, how would he dare to contradict Xiao Pan?

Wang Chi and the rest couldn't imagine that Xiao Pan would be so unyielding. For a moment they did not dare to say anything.

Since Shang Yang's reform of Qin politics, power had been concentrated in the sovereign. If Zhu Ji does not object, Xiao Pan could do whatever he pleased. Short of fomenting outright rebellion, all subjects had to obey his words as absolute commands.

Xiao Pan was secretly gratified. Ever since Xiang Shaolong left Qin, he had silently endured the pressure from Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei. Now that Xiang Shaolong was back, he felt a

sea change in power, both psychologically and in substance. How could he not seize the opportunity to emphasize his sovereignty, cracking down on Lu Buwei to intimidate the pack of court officials.

If he was not such a person, he would not have become the Qin Shihuang in the later years.

The great hall became so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

Zhu Ji spoke for the first time, saying, "The position of Minister of War will be assumed by Great General Wang Ling. Do the subjects have any opinion?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself on hearing this. He mused that Xiao Pan the future Qin Shihuang would never have asked for anyone's opinion.

Wang Chi was from the same clan as Wang Ling and was happy with what he heard, saying, "Great General Wang Ling is certainly the best candidate."

Lu Buwei had originally intended for it to be Meng Ao, but since Zhu Ji had stated her weighty opinion, he had no choice but to abide by it. He couldn't help glaring at Xiang Shaolong ferociously, knowing that it was him behind all this mischief.

Cai Ze acted the senior and bowed, saying, "The post of Left Premier is of great importance. Unless the candidate is virtuous and prestigious, he cannot command the respect of the people. Who is Empress Dowager and Crown Prince's

preferred candidate?"

It was Zhu Ji's turn to be struck speechless. This was because if virtue and prestige were the criteria, Lord Changping would be far back in the queue. Xiang Shaolong took a look at Lord Changping who was standing guard on the dais. His head was bowed and he was silent. His face was blushing, betraying his fear and doubt. He knew that if he did not turn the tide now, all the officials would soon echo Cai Ze. Maybe even Zhu Ji would begin to waver too.

With a loud laugh, he said, "Duke Cai is right. Nonetheless this small official thinks that this is still insufficient. In my humble opinion, the candidates eligible for the post of Premier should fulfill three criteria."

Next, he turned towards Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji and bowed, saying, "Empress Dowager and Crown Prince are wise. Will you allow this small official to explain his viewpoint?"

Xiao Pan rejoiced and after asking Zhu Ji for instructions, he happily ordered, "Grand Tutor Xiang, please speak forthrightly. Do not have any reservations."

Lu Buwei and his faction were all wary in their hearts, but could not prevent him from speaking.

Du Bi's face displayed a sneer. In his standpoint, he would actually rather that the Left Premier post not fall into Lu Buwei's hands.

Even though Wang Chi was leaning towards Lu Buwei, he was finally still a central pillar of the Qin military. He also had

a favorable opinion of Xiang Shaolong. That is why as long as what Xiang Shaolong said was reasonable, he would support it.

The situation was exceptionally delicate.

Everyone's attention fell on Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed with a little pride and said, "I am unworthy. Firstly, this person must have sufficient learning to assume this office. Virtue and vision can be cultivated and are not so important at this moment. Take Premier Lu as an example. Everyone knows the circumstances under which he assumed the post of Premier, but is there anyone now who is not convinced in heart and speech? From this you can understand the reasoning behind this small official's first criterion.

Everyone was dumbstruck, the reason being that Xiang Shaolong has forcibly laid this matter on Lu Buwei's credibility. If anyone objects, it would be akin to challenging Lu Buwei.

Lu Buwei almost burst with rage. He hated most having his past mentioned. Nonetheless this time he found it difficult to speak.

Meng Ao's expression became grave and he laughed coldly, asking, "Could we know what Official Xiang's next two criteria are?"

Xiang Shaolong coolly replied, "The position of Left Premier oversees the largest part of the military chain of command,

hence the person must be a high-ranking military officer. Furthermore, to satisfy the hearts of the soldiers, this person must be like Premier Xu, a native-born Qin general. Only thus can he inspire our Great Qin's soldiers to serve willingly and loyally. This criterion is critical and must not be neglected."

These words had as well as eliminated any chance for Wang Wan or Meng Ao to be the Left Premier.

And the only people who could fulfill these two criteria were Du Bi and Wang Chi. Lord Changping fell short by a little bit.

Lu Buwei was green with anger, but could not say anything once again. This was because Xiang Shaolong's logic was irrefutable.

Apart from Wang Chi himself, all the high ranking military officers from native Qin nodded in agreement.

Xiao Pan slapped the table and said, "Well said! Now even I am interested in hearing the third criterion."

Xiang Shaolong first thanked Xiao Pan for his permission before smiling and saying, "The third criterion is that this person must be youthful and promising so as to be able to grow together with the Crown Prince. This will ensure continuity of policies. This argument may be audacious, but there is reason behind it. As long as one thinks carefully, one can see the beauty of it."

In truth this had always been the weakest of Xiang Shaolong's three criteria. The officials erupted immediately,



frantically discussing the issue with one another.

Lu Buwei chuckled and said, "Grand Tutor Xiang's last criterion leaves much room for discussion. Who does Grand Tutor have in mind?"

Xiao Pan laughed and said, "Grand Tutor Xiang's words agree with my thinking. Lord Changping, receive the decree!"

The great hall swiftly become silent.

Lord Changping ran out and prostrated himself below the dragon steps.

Xiao Pan solemnly pronounced, "From this day forward, Lord Changping will be my Great Qin's Left Premier. My decision is final. The officials shall not quibble over this nor shall they have another opinion!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed in his heart and without even sparing the livid Lu Buwei a look, he led the court in kneeling in acknowledgement of the Crown Prince's order.

What had been an impossibility had become reality just like that.

The pivotal move was obtaining Lao Ai and Zhu Ji's support. With this, Lao Ai and Zhu Ji's faction had also openly and irrevocably severed relations with Lu Buwei.



CHAPTER 4  
Gold Upon The City Gates  
[Translated by JUSTIN13]

ON the same day that Lord Changping assumed the position of Left Premier, Prince Dan led his men back to Yan. Xiang Shaolong asked Liu Chao and Pu Bu to lead City Cavalry troops in escort, preventing any conspiracy from Lu Buwei.

As they parted reluctantly, Xiang Shaolong left the city and returned to the ranch to bury Zhao Ya properly. Due to their own mourning, they were obliged by custom to miss Lu Gong's funeral.

By the time everything was settled, ten days had passed.

Xiao Pan dispatched messengers three times to urge him back to the city. By now, Xiang Shaolong had gradually nursed himself back from his grief and determined to return to the city the next morning.

Heavy snow had started falling since dusk. After they had said a prayer for Zhao Ya, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran returned to their home shoulder to shoulder.

Ji Yanran grabbed his hand and gently said, "When you return to the city this time, you should first pay Sister Qing a visit, else she is sure to be very unhappy!"

Xiang Shaolong was startled, "Have you seen her?"

Ji Yanran nodded, saying, "I did see her! She also knows about Madam Ya's passing, if not she would not have forgiven you."

Xiang Shaolong replied in distress, "Didn't you forbid me from touching your Sister Qing? Why are you encouraging me to look for her now?"

Ji Yanran sighed serenely saying, "Maybe its because of my love and respect for her! I think she is losing her self control with you. Else she would not have lowered her noble self to come here looking for you the day after we returned. Of course she pretended it was just to see me, but on learning that you had gone to the court meeting, her entire being became listless. Ai! I do not know what to say."

The moment they stepped into the rear garden, there was a flash and Shan Rou had cut off the two people.

The two of them received a fright and let go of their hands.

Shan Rou reached out her hand and pinched Ji Yanran's cheek and displayed an enchanting smile, saying, "Beautiful girl! This girl wants to borrow your husband for a while!"

Ji Yanran did not expect to be teased by Shan Rou and did not know whether to laugh or be angry. She said in annoyance, "If you want to borrow then borrow! Am I Ji Yanran that possessive?"

With a lovely laugh, she left.

Shan Rou took the initiative and pulled Xiang Shalong's hand and coming to a little pavilion in the inner garden, she turned and hugged him tightly. She heaved a sigh and said, "Xiang Shaolong! I am leaving!"

Xiang Shaolong hoarsely cried, "What?"

Shan Rou pushed him away and turning her lovely body around, said with some irritation, "I've said it so clearly, didn't you hear? I am leaving!"

Xiang Shaolong moved forward and hugged her little petulant waist, somberly saying, "Where is Sister Rou going?"

Shan Rou heaved another sigh. Shaking her head, she said, "Please don't ask, ok? In short I will be returning to Qi tomorrow. I can't be sure that I will be back to see you in the future."

Xiang Shaolong recalled the words she had said when they

were in Chu. Then she had denied it as a lie, but going by the present circumstance, it could be true after all. Thinking about the reasons she would throw herself into another man's embrace, he could not help but be dejected. Still, he could not do anything and could only remain speechless for a while.

Shan Rou quietly said, "Why are you not talking? Are you angry with me?!"

Xiang Shaolong released the hand he had looped around her and laughed bitterly saying, "What right do I have to be angry with you? Sister Rou should do whatever she wants to do! How could I Xiang Shaolong interfere?"

Shan Rou turned around like a tornado and looped her arms round his neck, both her eyes displaying deep emotion. With a gentleness that she has never shown before, she said, "Let Zhi Zhi represent me in service of you, but tonight I, Shan Rou will belong to you Xiang Shaolong. I will listen to commands and run your errands. At the same time I want you to remember that Shan Rou will never forget Xiang Shaolong. Its just regretful that Shan Rou has made a promise to someone else. The details have been made known to you earlier."

Xiang Shaolong looked at the flurryng snow outside the pavilion and remembered the tragic Zhao Ya. The pain in his heart covered over his indignation over

Shan Rou's leaving. He nodded his head and said, "I understand. Sister should wholeheartedly do what she

wants to do! We cannot have everything we want. I, Xiang Shaolong, am resigned to this fate."

Shan Rou silently leaned into his embrace and for the first time, Xiang Shaolong saw the glistening teardrop rolling in her beautiful eyes.

When he woke the next day, Shan Rou had already left quietly.

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to set aside his longing for her and got up to practice his sword skills.

Ji Yanran excitedly came over with her spear to spar with him. Wu Tingfang, the Tian Sisters and Xiang Bao'er stood at the side cheering. The atmosphere was glad and cheerful.

The Talented Lady Ji's spear technique was certainly accomplished. As the fight developed, even though Xiang Shaolong gave his all in an acrobatic display, he could not break the power of her spear. Withdrawing his sword, he laughed, "This kid admits defeat. Fortunately I still have the Flying Dragon Spear that is owed to me. I will go to the Intoxicated Wind Mansion these couple of days to demand it from Wu Fu. I will ask the Talented Lady's advice again."

Ji Yanran held her spear horizontally and laughed, saying, "This house has house rules. If you wish your wife to accompany you for the night, you must dispossess the spear in her hand. Tingfang and the rest will be witnesses."

Wu Tingfang and the rest applauded in glee, as if they would not be happy till they had seen some chaos.

Xiang Shaolong mischievously laughed, "If Talented Lady Ji considers that her opponent was not her husband whose emotions restrained his hand, do you think she will be able to boast on to the world!"

Ji Yanran's jade cheeks burned deep red and she angrily said, "If Xiang Shaolong is this kind of petty despicable person, even if I surrender my body, I will not be happy in my heart."

Xiang Shaolong knew that her intentions were good, to use this to encourage him to improve his skills diligently. He sobered up and said, "Relax! I was but cracking a joke! As long as Talented Lady gives me three years, I will be able..."

Ji Yanran's pupils opened wide and she hoarsely said, "Three years?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly and stepped forward, pulling her into his embrace and said soothingly, "Even three days is too long for me. How could I let the Talented Lady restrain herself in isolation like a widow for three years, ha....."

At this moment, Jing Shan arrived with a report that Wu Yingyuan had returned.

As Xiang Shaolong celebrated, Wu Tingfang had barrelled out to greet him.

As he arrived at the main hall of the master residence, the spirited Wu Yingyuan had been enveloped by Wu Tingfang in a large embrace. Tao Fang was reporting the recent developments to him.

After a round of noise and excitement, Wu Yingyuan carried



Xiang Bao'er and sat down beside Xiang Shaolong and Tao Fang to talk. Wu Tingfang automatically massaged her father's tired shoulders. The hall was brimming with familial warmth and affection.

After Wu Yingyuan said a few sentences of praise to Xiang Shaolong, he laughed and said, "This trip I visited the distant northern lands and saw that the land that Wu Zhuo has been working on is truly a blessed paradise. The terrain is superior, with abundant water and lush greenery. Wu Zhuo has constructed a large ranch and has also received a few minority tribes who have been oppressed by the barbarians as resident workers. The whole effort is progressing steadily, but more manpower is needed else we cannot deal with the barbarians."

Xiang Shaolong said, "I too have this intention. This is because Wang Jian will be posted back to Xianyang soon. Without his assistance, we will have to rely on ourselves for everything."

Wu Yingyuan said, "I have discussed this with Little Zhuo. He needs at least two thousand more men. Is that a problem?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "No problem at all."

Wu Yingyuan relaxed and informed Tao Fang, "Master Tao, please take charge of this. Eventually, I wished to move our Wu Household gradually away from Qin towards the Northern Lands. After all, it is the best place to live and prosper. In the future, we need not worry about politics or power struggles."

After discussing the details further, Xiang Shaolong led his wives and the Guardians back to Xianyang City.

Back at the city, he headed to the palace first to visit Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was delighted to see him again and received him as usual in the Imperial Study. After seating themselves, he started, "Lian Po has been sacked."

Although it was within expectations, Xiang Shaolong felt some hints of despair. From now onwards, Zhao will be controlled by Guo Kai and Pang Nuan. At the same time, he wondered about Li Mu's fate.

Xiao Pan appears to have a great dislike for Lian Po. With this burden off his chest, he added, "Without Lian Po, Zhao is akin to having lost half of their fighting ability. If Li Mu is gone too, it will be the end of Zhao."

Xiang Shaolong knew that he harbours deep hatred for the people of Zhao which is something beyond his control. In a deep voice, he inquired, "Did they kill Lian Po?"

Xiao Pan plainly state, "Lian Po is a wise strategist. The minute he sensed something wrong, he immediately led his kinsmen and escaped to Daliang City together. I heard that he had fallen ill due to his anger at the Zhao politicians. Ai! Age is catching up on him and he is just a shade of his former glory."

Xiang Shaolong's spirits sank.

Xiao Pan sighed, "Unfortunately, Li Mu is still fighting a

successful battle against the Xiong Nu at the northern border. It seems like he will still enjoy a prolonged period of prosperity. As long as he is around, we cannot afford to attack Zhao and can only focus our armies on Han and Wei.”

Remembering his old friends Han Chuang, Han Feizi and Lord Longyang, Xiang Shaolong felt even worse.

He was most concerned about Lord Longyang and expressed, “If Lian Po is helping Wei, it will not be so easy to attack them.”

Misunderstanding his intention, Xiao Pan sniggered, “Master need not fret. This is called retribution. Earlier this year, Lian Po had attacked Wei and conquered their Rongyang Province. King Anli of Wei hates him to the core. Now that he has defected to Daliang, it will be a blessing if they did not kill him at sight. Why would they even use him as their defending general?”

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Changing the topic, Xiao Pan commented, “Using the water engineer Zheng Guo from Han, Lu Buwei has started building the irrigation canal for more than a year. They planned to divert water from River Jing towards the east and merge with River Luo in the north. This project has exhausted our resources and manpower, making it hard for us to attack the eastern states. At most, we can only attack Han. Currently, Meng Ao is working hard at recruiting and training new soldiers to increase our military strength. I have a suggestion, Why don’t Master lead an expedition personally and accumulate military

contributions? This will help to suppress Meng Ao and Wang Ci's influence."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly shocked. He hurriedly advised, "This is not the best time. If I am gone, Lu Buwei may try something funny in my absence. We had better wait for Lord Changping to consolidate his influence first."

Xiao Pan sighed, agreeing that Xiang Shaolong's words do make sense and did not insist any further. His mood turning better, he laughed, "Thinking about the other day when we coordinated our words during the morning court and suppressed Lu Buwei, I was filled with joy."

Xiang Shaolong enquired, "Lu Buwei will surely find some other ways to hit back at us. Did he do anything unusual these days?"

Xiao Pan bitterly smiled, "His methods caught me by surprise. On the second day after you left for the farm, that traitor dangled a reward of one thousand taels of gold upon the city gates. He bragged that if anyone can improve on his <<Spring & Autumn Annals of Lu>> by even one word, he will reward the gold to him. This has caused everyone to analyze his works. As Master knows, this book from hell is only his own theories to establish power and compete with my royal authority. This is so infuriating!"

Xiang Shaolong was speechless. This traitor surely knows how to advertise himself to the common population. In this manner, he will indirectly influence the thinking of the Qin population and create doubts about Shang Yang's reforms

which emphasizes on royal authority.

He is from the 21st Century and he understood the powerful effects of mass media influence better than Xiao Pan.

This cannot be easily resolved by force or strength. Reminded about his beloved Talented Lady Ji, he stood up and promised, "Crown Prince need not panic. Give me some time to think this over. The next time I see you, I will present you with a viable solution."

Xiao Pan was elated, "I knew that Master will give me a brilliant counter strategy. Please hurry up. I will wait for your good news."

In actual fact, Xiang Shaolong is making an empty promise and did not have the slightest confidence that Talented Lady Ji will have a good solution too. But in front of this future Qin Shihuang who holds him in such high regard, he could only force himself to accept this task.

Stepping out of the Imperial Study, he thought of Li Si and guessed that he should be able to provide some assistance to counter Lu Buwei's propaganda too. After all, he is more talented than himself in political theories. With this in mind, he went to look for him.

Li Si was buried in his work. When Xiang Shaolong showed up at his workplace, he happily welcomed him into the inner hall.

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "Why are you so busy? Is it related to Lord Changping?"

Li Si settled down in his seat and his face reddened, "I have just finished his work and am now working on my own."

Xiang Shaolong was curious, "Why does Brother Li appear to be embarrassed about his own work?"

Li Si replied in a soft voice, "Shaolong must not laugh at me. For the past six months, I have been vigorously analyzing Shang Yang's reforms and spotted several loopholes and weakness in the operations and executions. Thus, I focused my attention and came up with a more suitable management model. If it is utilised, it will improve administration drastically and is extremely favourable to uniting the world in the future."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed, "Tell me more about it."

Li Si's eyes shone brightly and his spirits lifted, "Firstly, there is a weakness regarding the Left and Right Premiers. Both are positions with high authorities and it is hard to define their roles. Whoever that is holding more power can interfere with the other Premier's work. For example, Lu Buwei is constantly interfering with the Qin military. If we can limit his jurisdiction, we can curb his excessive power and solve the problem of Qin officials holding more authority than the Qin King at the same time."

Xiang Shaolong slapped his armrest, exclaiming, "I understand. Brother Li can use this to counter the Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu!"

Li Si nodded, "Exactly. Unfortunately, my powers are limited and can only use this as a discussion topic but cannot

implement this into full force to counter Lu Buwei's theories. Honestly speaking, Lu Buwei's theories are an amalgamation of the best theories in the world. Despite being on opposing ends, I must admit that he is a true administrative talent."

Xiang Shaolong insisted, "Brother Li, tell me more about your theories first."

Li Si joyfully gushed, "My methods are simple and effective. It is known as Three Premiers Nine Ministers administration. There will be a Chief Premier who will manage the majority of the officials and is in charge of politics. The Left Premier shall be renamed the Military Premier who will be in charge of all military affairs. The Right Premier shall be renamed the Administrative Premier who will manage all administrative affairs and inspections. These three Premiers roles do not overlap and they report directly to the Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong was moved. This Three Premier Nine Ministers method is much more appealing and to think that it was Li Si who created it. No wonder his legacy will last for centuries. At the same time, he can sense that Li Si harboured some selfish motives. The Administrative Premier is a role he created for himself in the future. He calmed down after accepting the fact that all men are selfish and seek personal gain at the end of the day.

Li Si continued, "The majority of the nine ministers refers the existing official positions that are already present in the Qin court but with their roles more clearly defined. The three Premiers are in charge of helping the King rule the country

and the day to day running of the country is still left to these ministers. They include the Rewards Minister, Ceremonial Minister, Health Minister, Defence Minister, Religious Minister, Entertainment Minister, Transportation Minister, Culture Minister and Construction Minister. The Palace Guards, Imperial Infantry and Imperial Cavalry shall be combined into one army under the control of the Defence Minister. This will avoid the internal conflicts between these three armies.”

Xiang Shaolong can tell that Li Si is putting so much effort into explaining these to him so that he can in turn present them to Xiao Pan.

He was willing to do this favour for Li Si as it is beneficial to Qin too. He nodded, “Brother Li please prepare your work well. When I enter the palace later, I will present these theories to Crown Prince.”

Li Si jumped up for joy, “You are truly my best friend and confidante. If Crown Prince is willing to adopt my theories, all my years of hard work will not be in vain.”

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and left merrily. He is more confident than anyone that this theory will be adopted. Otherwise, he would not have heard about this method when he was still in the 21st century.



## CHAPTER 5

## The Beginning Of The Five Elements Theory

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

PASSING by the Qin Residence, Xiang Shaolong can feel his entire body itching to see its owner. Finally, he succumbed to his desire.

Every family warrior guarding the gate knew about his special relationship with Qin Qing and invited him to enter the residence without announcing his arrival.

The housekeeper Uncle Fang escorted him into the main hall and was about to inform Qin Qing when Xiang Shaolong smiled, "I am just passing by. Let me just say hi to her."

After enquiring about her whereabouts, he entered the corridor and walked towards the rear chambers.

A few pretty maids were playing with the snow in the garden. Chancing upon Xiang Shaolong, they whispered and giggled among themselves before pointing him towards Qin Qing.

Crossing over the door ledge into the eastern chamber, he saw Qin Qing leaning towards the table at an angle. Dressed in a pale green dress and a purple shawl embroidered with phoenixes, her hair was tied up neatly in a bun with a few strands of hair hanging loosely. The loose strands of hair made her even more mesmerizing coupled with her flawless beauty. Even with Xiang Shaolong's strong willpower, he was stunned at this display before him.

With one hand holding a piece of cloth and the other sewing with a needle and thread, Qin Qing was fixated in her work.

Never in her wildest dreams did she expect Xiang Shaolong to appear suddenly before her. Shocked, she frantically tidied her hair and sat upright, chirping, "Ai, it is you!"

Witnessing her enchanting movements, Xiang Shaolong was aroused and stepped forward, sitting down beside her. Almost touching her lap, he leaned forward and greeted, "Hello Grand Tutor Qin! Please forgive me for visiting you after such a long delay."

Qin Qing leaned backwards and put more distance between their two faces but did not find fault with him. She almost wanted to whine out but held back, making her even sexier.

Xiang Shaolong noticed the embroidery in her hands and she somehow tried to hide it from his prying eyes. Curious, Xiang Shaolong asked, "What picture is Grand Tutor embroidering?"

Qin Qing's neck became burning hot instantly and she lowered her head, whining, "Will Official Xiang please watch your own behaviour? How can you sit right beside me at the same table without asking for permission?"

Xiang Shaolong guessed that her embarrassment came about because the embroidery is possibly linked to him. His heart filled with sweetness, he gently coaxed, "I am only here to pay my respects and have to take my leave now. If I have offended you, it is just for a short period anyway. Please forgive me for this temporary rudeness."

Qin Qing seriously state, "You! You had to barge in like this and caught me in a dishevelled state."

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward slightly to enjoy her body fragrance and smiled, "I beg to differ. Had I not barged in, I would not be able to see the intoxicating side of you."

Qin Qing regained her usual icy composure but her face is still slightly red. Standing up and away from the other side of the table, she placed her embroidery into a painted box near her. She carefully and delicately arranged everything in the box neatly before shutting it. Xiang Shaolong came up to her side and imitated her posture, softly asking, "I have returned safely. Are you happy?"

From his angle, he can enjoy the features of this ancient

beauty and was swept off his feet. Naturally, his words carry a hint of teasing.

Qin Qing kept quiet for some time before turning around to shoot him a look. She slowly sighed, "I thought Official Xiang has something else to do? Don't waste your precious time here."

These two sentences are as good as pouring a bucket of ice water over Xiang Shaolong's head. Xiang Shaolong immediately snapped out of his stupor and his passion fizzled out. After a short daze, he can no longer stand the awkward silence between the two of them and with some anger; he nodded and paid his respects. He furiously strode towards the door and swore to never step into the Qin Residence again.

Before he can cross the door ledge, Qin Qing softly whistled, "Xiang Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong stood still and coldly snorted, "What else does Grand Tutor Qin want now?!"

Footsteps sounded softly as Qin Qing came up to his back. Her gentle voice filled his ears, "Are you angry?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled, "If it was you, would you be happy?"

Qin Qing went around him to his front and plainly state, "Of course not but do you realise that your behaviour is simply disrespectful!"

Xiang Shaolong had a big revelation. All along, Qin Qing had

misunderstood him. As she has many spies in the palace, she must have thought that he and Zhu Ji share a special relationship which makes Zhu Ji support him wholeheartedly. She was mistaken that he had used his charm to seduce Zhu Ji and despised him for that. Therefore, she becomes cold and unfeeling towards him.

He shook his head and smiled bitterly, "Grand Tutor Qin thinks too lowly of me. Forget it! You are free to believe whatever you wish. I am used to being misunderstood by you anyway."

Ignoring her wailing, he left the Qin residence in a huff.

Just as he left the Qin Residence with the Eighteen Guardians, he ran headlong into Ying Ying and several of her female warriors.

Both their entourage stopped beside the main road. With a guilty conscience, Ying Ying awkwardly greeted, "Hello Official Xiang! Why didn't you visit me despite having returned such a long time ago?"

Xiang Shaolong is in a bad mood and he knew that Ying Ying is still fooling around with Guan Zhongxie. Unwilling to humour her, he coldly replied, "Will you be free if I visited you?"

Paying no further attention to her, he slapped his horse and left.

Back at the Wu Residence, he quickly searched for Ji Yanran.

Talented Lady Ji had just completed her two favourite tasks,

Taking a short nap and having a hot water shower after the nap. Smelling sweetly, she was seated on a small armchair and leaning on a soft cushion. She was slightly covered by a light blanket and was reading quietly. A jade flute was resting on her bosom and it was a sight to behold.

Seeing her, Xiang Shaolong forgot all the unhappiness he encountered today and slipped into her blanket and her bosom without her consent. Ji Yanran smilingly put down her book and allowed Xiang Shaolong to soak in her fragrance. She slowly asked, "What problems did you have today? You have such a long face."

Xiang Shaolong let out a comfortable sigh and explained to her about Lu Buwei hanging a thousand taels of gold at the City gates.

Ji Yanran furrowed her brows slightly and crossed her legs. Pushing some loose strands of hair behind her ears, she simply replied, "This is a powerful method by Lu Buwei to create the impression that he is the new saint. It is not impossible to counter him. Ai! Can you please stop kissing me there? How can I think straight with this distraction?"

Xiang Shaolong moved his greedy lips away from her neck and sat upright unwillingly. Scrutinizing her well-defined eyes, he cheered, "I knew you would have a good plan."

Ji Yanran shot him a look and her eyes twinkled with joy. She added, "I have read the Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu and it is truly a masterpiece. Its only loophole is that it is heavily plagiarised from the works of others. Compared to

godfather, he is way below. Its weakness is its impracticability. If I recite his Five Elements theory, Lu Buwei's work will seem like child's play."

Xiang Shaolong frowned, "I thought godfather's work is just something used to predict the future? How can it be used to counter the Annals?"

Leaning into his bosom, Ji Yanran cutely giggled, "Hubby is so muddle-headed and adorable at the same time. Lu Buwei is promoting his Annals to portray himself as a new saint and suppress the influence of the Qin King over the population. All we need to do is to explain the theories of the Five Elements. For example, Zhou is Fire Element and Qin is Water Element. Water extinguishes Fire so Qin will unite the world for sure. We will immortalize Crown Prince into the Leader of the era and Lu Buwei can only pale in comparison."

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic and carried the fragrant and helpless Ji Yanran in his arms, laughing, "Talented Lady Ji shall now accompany me into the palace."

Ji Yanran protested, "I am so relaxed now; can we enter the palace tomorrow instead?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "No! The wife should follow her husband. Talented Lady Ji must leave with me immediately."

While they are still bickering, Tian Zhen came to report that Qin Qing is here.

Ji Yanran struggled out of his bosom and kissed him, "You go

ahead and welcome Sister Qin. I need to get changed in order to enter the palace with you! After all, it is just my luck to marry a husband like you!”

Laughingly, she slipped away.

When Xiang Shaolong stepped into the main hall, Qin Qing is seated with her back to the scenic garden that was covered with a blanket of white snow. It was an elegant portrayal that highlights her aristocracy and purity.

Coming up to her back, Xiang Shaolong was feeling apologetic, knowing that he had been too narrow minded, causing her to come all the way here to find him. He lightly apologised, “I’m sorry!”

Qin Qing’s delicate frame trembled slightly and she took two deep breaths to suppress her emotions. In a peaceful manner, she declared, “Xiang Shaolong! The reason I come all the way here today is to clarify something with you.”

All Xiang Shaolong wanted to do was to grab her tender shoulders and pull her into his bosom but Qin Qing has this aura of innocence and purity that creates an intangible gap between them, forcing him to resist this temptation.

He sighed, “If you are here to appease me with some insincere words, you can save it. I will not deceive myself any longer. I hope you will do the same. Ha!”

Qin Qing turned her body around. With her eyes shining, she wailed loudly, “When did I say anything insincere to you?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that they are now even closer to each



other after the last misunderstanding. Qin Qing is easily offended by his gestures because she has been chaste for a very long time. He suitably offered, "That's good. Yanran and I are entering the palace to visit the Crown Prince. Does Grand Tutor Qin want to come along?"

Forgetting about her own affair, Qin Qing was taken by surprise, "What is it that requires you to get Sister Yanran involved?"

Ji Yanran happened to come up to them in her outdoor clothes. Speaking as they walked, they boarded the horse carriage and entered the palace.

Everyone of importance in Xiao Pan's circle of trust was assembled in the Imperial Study. They include Xiang Shaolong, Li Si, Lord Changping, Wang He, Qin Qing and of course Ji Yanran. Together, they are here to listen to Talented Lady Ji's explanation of the Five Elements Theory.

Seated at the head of the seats on Xiao Pan's right, Ji Yanran spoke out in her usual charming manner, "The Five Elements are in continuous motion and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. They submit to the Chosen One. The person who unites the world will possess one of the elements. The Five Elements are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. Each element will shine for some time before it diminishes and be replaced by the rise of another element. The Yellow Emperor is Earth Element. Wood counters Earth. Xia Yu is the Wood Element. Metal counters Wood. Shang Tang is the Metal Element. Fire counters Metal. King Zhou Wen is the Fire

Element. Now, the Zhou Dynasty is in decline. The next element to come into power is the Water Element which counters the Fire Element.”

His eyes shining with curiosity, Xiao Pan repeated, “Water counters Fire! Water counters Fire!”

Playing on the safe side, Wang He questioned, “I acknowledged the brilliance of Zou Yan’s philosophies but it is still a theory that is only professed by him alone. Is there any other evidence?”

Ji Yanran’s eyes rotated with charm. Every man in the room including Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were intoxicated.

As if she is stating a fact, Ji Yanran explained, “The Five Elements have already been mentioned in the Book of Shang; Water nourishes, Fire burns, Wood crafts, Metal tools, Earth constructs. Since the ancient times, there have been six gases and five solids. The five tastes are spicy, sour, salty, bitter and sweet. There are five musical notes Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So. The five main basic colours are white, black, red, yellow and green. The other colours are a mixture of the basic five and they affect one another.”

Seated beside her, Qin Qing mused, “Mencius did mention that a new King will rise every five hundred odd years. The period between Xia Yu and Shang Tang is around five hundred years; the period between Shang Tang and King Zhou Wen is also five hundred years. Now, the rise of Confucius is about five hundred years after Zhou. This must be the rise and fall of the Five Elements.”

Li Si guessed, “Confucius is only a scholar and is not worthy of being referred to as an outstanding King. I believe Crown Prince is the new Ruler of this era.”

Xiao Pan was overjoyed but was concerned that he may not be the New Saint. He frowned, “It is difficult to pinpoint who is the new King every five hundred years. How can we turn this into an argument against Lu Buwei’s propaganda?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “Of course we will employed our own propaganda and stake it on the widespread influence of Talented Lady’s Godfather Zou Yan. Who is a better person other than him to pinpoint the New Saint? I am certain everyone will be convinced by his prediction.”

Pausing, he seriously added, “We must use the Five Elements and Official Li’s Three Premier Nine Ministers recommendation to overhaul the power of the Qin court. This will stabilise the Crown Prince’s authority and prevent Lu Buwei from abusing his power.”

Ji Yanran smiled, “This is called ‘using one’s weapons against oneself’. The Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu is a compilation of works from different philosophers and also contain certain chapters that support Godfather’s Five Elements Theory. During the reign of the Yellow Emperor, giant earthworms were sighted and the Earth Element is strong. Earth is yellow which became his nickname. The Water Element will replace the Fire Element. The matching colour of Water is black. We can make use of Lu Buwei’s propaganda to turn the tables around and put him down. When that happens, he can only

wallow in self pity.”

Xiao Pan slapped his armrest and praised, “This is great news indeed.”

Still having reservations, Wang He questioned with suspicions, “Talented Lady Ji mentioned that during the reign of the Chosen One, there will be some auspicious sightings. During the Yellow Emperor reign, giant earthworms are sighted and the fire phoenix is sighted during King Zhou Wen’s reign. If there is no auspicious sighting for Crown Prince, it is hard to convince the Qin people.”

Xiang Shaolong is from the 21st century and knew better than anyone else the powerful effects of marketing and brainwashing the population. Everything can be manipulated to create a sensation. Inspired, he suggested, “This is easy. When the Crown Prince is crossing a river, we will create a Black Dragon that will appear in the water. It will be exactly like the Loch Ness Monster... Hei! It’s nothing. The Dragon only needs to reveal its head and back to be regarded as an auspicious sign for the Crown Prince. After that, everything impossible will become possible.”

Lord Changping frowned, “Talk is cheap. If we are discovered, we will be the laughing stock of the world.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled that Zhou Wei’s elder brother Zhou Liang is a boat expert and the mechanical experts of Ji Yanran’s State of Yue. He laughed, “Leave this to me. The Black Dragon only needs to move a bit and sink back into the

water to accomplish our mission. I guarantee that no one will see through this ruse.”

Xiao Pan burst out laughing, “I shall have to bother Grand Tutor then.”

Facing Ji Yanran, he continued, “If I am the chosen one, there must be other accompanying evidence. Please help me see to this and act according to plan.”

His expression turning serious, he declared, “This information is limited to everyone present today. If this is leaked, the offender will be executed with his household.”

Everyone accepted his order.

Xiang Shaolong is feeling crazy. He did not expect his conflict with Lu Buwei to involve propaganda and marketing. This is going to be a public relations battle.

## CHAPTER 6

## Creating Trouble At The Brothel

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER the historical meeting, Lord Changping forcefully dragged Xiang Shaolong away from the reluctant Ji Yanran and Qin Qing. At the Left Premier Residence of Lord Changping, Lord Changwen is already waiting for them patiently.

Once the doors have been secured, Lord Changwen slammed the table and cursed, “Damn that bastard Guan Zhongxie! His charm has caused our sister to be completely bewitched by him. The Crown Prince has informed us

through Official Li to take our sister in hand. What shall we do?"

Lord Changping rested his hand on Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and laughed, "I can tell that even Grand Tutor Qin is interested in you; wooing our sister should be an easy task for you. Shaolong must help us win her back from Guan Zhongxie's influences."

With Shan Rou's recent departure, Zhao Ya's death and the passing of Xu Xian and Lu Gong, Xiang Shaolong has been dealt with one heavy blow after another. Except for Qin Qing, he is no longer bothered with any other woman. Ying Ying is obnoxious and fickle-minded. If he had met her when he first came to this era, they will have a good time together. But after experiencing Lady Ni's suicide and Zhao Ya's betrayal, all he seeks is true love.

Lord Changping continued, "I heard rumours that Lu Niangrong is personally pushing for a rematch between you and Guan Zhongxie. She will only marry him if he defeats you."

Lord Changwen pleaded, "No matter what, Shaolong must help the two of us this time. If Guan Zhongxie rebels in the future, our sister will be implicated and the consequences are unbearable."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled, "Love cannot be forced. What do you want me to do?"

Lord Changping suggested, "We are now openly opposing Lu Buwei so we might as well go all the way. You must fight and

defeat Guan Zhongxie. Our sister will never hang around with a loser and this problem will be resolved automatically.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied, “If I defeated Guan Zhongxie to marry Lu Nianrong, I’d rather concede the fight.”

Lord Changwen laughed, “Relax! Lu Buwei will never marry his favourite daughter to you. You need not fight him openly but just prove yourself to be better than him in one way or another. This will increase your prestige and lower Guan Zhongxie’s. Our sister will then recognise who is the real hero.”

In a begging tone, Lord Changping implored, “The most arrogant people in Xianyang City now are the men from the Premier Mentor Residence. Everyone hates them to the core. If Shaolong can stand up to them, it will be helping the Crown Prince too. In fact, every one of us is waiting for you to come back and lead us against them.”

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to brighten up and bitterly smiled after some thought, “All right. Reserve a table tonight at the Drunken Wind Brothel and insist on Dan Meimei and Guiyan to be our companions. We shall create a scene there tonight and demand my rightful Flying Dragon Spear at the same time.”

Both men were delighted and hurriedly left to see to the arrangements.

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to slip back to the Wu Residence. Whilst inquiring about Zhou Liang, he discovered



that he has left to look for the King Eagle and has yet to return despite having left six months ago. Slightly worried, he looked for Zhou Wei instead.

Probably due to the nourishment of Wu Guo's love, Zhou Wei is looking great and her beauty became even more outstanding. When she met Xiang Shaolong, she retains some sense of awkwardness.

After getting her seated, Xiang Shaolong enquired; "Why is your brother away for so long?"

Zhou Wei explained, "To find the best hunting eagles, elder brother needs to go far to the northern regions. The journey to and back requires at least four months and time is also needed to search for eaglets. Luck plays a part too."

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed, "I needed his help now, what should I do?"

Zhou Wei brightened up, "I may lack his true expertise but my knowledge is not too shabby too. May I know what kind of assistance do you require?"

Xiang Shaolong suspiciously scanned her confident expression, "You know how to build ships too? It is more than just basic shipbuilding, it is actually... I don't know what to say."

Zhou Wei gleefully assured, "Master can speak his mind. Shipbuilding is a strong tradition in our family and the skill is passed on to both males and females. My shipbuilding skills are not inferior compared to my brother."

It is Xiang Shaolong's turn to brighten up and he revealed his plans about the Black Dragon.

Zhou Wei frowned heavily upon hearing his plans. After some consideration, she pointed, "It is not difficult to build a submerged vessel but it is hard to provide continuous air supply. If they surfaced to breathe, we will be exposed."

Xiang Shaolong suggested, "I thought about this too but it is not something impossible. The human head can be concealed below the skin of the dragon and some breathing holes can be made. Moreover, we will base the dragon far away from shore so it is hard for anyone to expose us. However, this dragon needs to have good buoyancy and must be easy to fix and dismantle underwater. That should be all we need."

Zhou Wei cheered, "Leave this to me. Ah, this is wonderful; I can finally contribute something for Master."

Xiang Shaolong was pleased, "Is Wu Guo treating you well?"

Her cheeks glowing red, Zhou Wei knelt down, "Master, please decide my future for me."

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "It is settled then. It is time for Wu Guo to settle down too."

Returning back to the inner hall, he told Wu Tingfang about Wu Guo and Zhou Wei's marriage. Wu Tingfang is more than happy and took up the heavy responsibility of arranging their marriage.

Xiang Shaolong played with Xiang Bao'er for a while and

heaped praises on Ji Yanran before taking a shower with the Tian sisters. He then head back to the Cavalry Command Centre.

Regardless of rank and experience, every Cavalry soldier is full of respect for Xiang Shaolong for his heroics. Everyone greeted him most sincerely.

Back at his office, Jing Jun was nowhere to be found.

Teng Yi explained, "Little Jun has gone to look for Lu Dan'er. Ai, I nearly forgot. He wanted me to beg you to propose marriage on his behalf. I think he is taking this relationship very seriously!"

Xiang Shaolong was elated, "As long as Lu Dan'er does not object, it shouldn't be an issue. But Wang He should propose marriage instead of me given the prestige of the Lu Family in Xianyang City."

Teng Yi agreed, "Lu Dan'er is now madly in love with Little Jun so she will never object. It is best that you propose marriage with Wang He. This will prove our sincerity in uniting these two lovebirds."

Sitting down, Xiang Shaolong nodded in consent.

Teng Yi updated, "I have assigned favourable positions to Zhao Da and his brothers which Lord Changping has gladly approved. We are fortunate to have him as our Left Premier; otherwise, it will be difficult for us to get anything done."

Xiang Shaolong twinkled, "We have a more powerful method to undermine Lu Buwei's authority."

He went on to detail his plan about the fake dragon.

Teng Yi praised, "This method is better than beating him up. Since he hanged the gold reward upon the city gates, I have been taking precautions against a rebellion. This plan should be carried out as soon as possible. When do you plan to execute this?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Immediately after the dragon event, we can proceed to change the court administration. It is best to wait for the Spring Festival. So we have to produce our dragon within these two months."

Teng Yi commented, "It is not advisable to let Guan Zhongxie be the Imperial Infantry Commander. We should remove him from this post as soon as possible. Little Jun has told me that the people of the Premier Mentor Residence are running amok and oppressing the common folks all because of Guan Zhongxie shielding them. This is so infuriating."

Xiang Shaolong recalled the good old days in the 21st century when he was creating trouble and getting into fights too. He laughed, "They think they are tough? We'll show them who calls the shots. Is Second Brother free tonight to join me in creating a scene at the Drunken Wind Brothel?"

Teng Yi burst out laughing and happily nodded, "My hands are itching already and I have been training hard over the past six months. I would have challenged Guan Zhongxie to a duel myself if not for you."

Checking the sky, Xiang Shaolong decided, "We shall meet at the brothel two hours later. Now, I am going to speak to

Meng Ao privately. If I can turn him against Lu Buwei, it will be an additional bonus.”

After dismissing his attendants, Meng Ao stared at Xiang Shaolong for a moment and sighed, “If Official Xiang is here to say anything negative about Premier Mentor, you can save the trouble.”

Pausing for a while, his eyes shone with a tinge of apology before he plainly added, “I am a Qi native and am heavily discriminated in Qin. Wherever I go, I was ridiculed and suffered numerous humiliations. It is only when I work for Premier Mentor did I have the chance to hold my head up high again. My gratitude for him is tremendous. He may be unscrupulous but given all that he has done for me, even if he wants me and my two sons to die for him, I will not have the slightest resistance. If not for Shaolong doing your best to protect my two sons, I will not let you take a single step into my General Residence. But this is the last time too.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “So General knows about that incident.”

With pain shooting out of his eyes, Meng Ao slowly nodded, “I did interrogate Meng Wu and Meng Tian about the ambush along the river. Naturally, I knew that something is amiss. It is a past event now and I do not wish to bring the past up. Grand Tutor Xiang, I won’t see you out!”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to be so fiercely loyal to Lu Buwei. Angered, he stood up and simply warned, “To each his own. I do not want to force you but I should tell you

that you need to draw a line between your loyalty to Qin and your loyalty to Lu Buwei. Otherwise, all your descendants will not be spared. Goodbye!"

Finishing, he strode in large steps towards the main door.

Meng Ao roared, "Hold it!"

Xiang Shaolong held his step and coldly challenged, "You want me to leave my head behind?"

Meng Ao stood up and remarked in a deep voice, "I differentiate between gratitude and grudges and I detest lowly behaviour too. Premier Mentor may be greedy for power but it is to safeguard his life too. According to history, every foreigner who becomes the Premier of Qin suffers a fate worse than death. Premier Mentor was forced to do what he had to do. If Shaolong can let go of the past, I can persuade Premier Mentor to..."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and bitterly laughed, "It is too late. Ever since he murdered Princess Qian and the rest, our debt can only be settled with blood. Moreover, he poisoned King Zhuangxiang, assassinated Xu Xian and caused Lu Gong to die of anger. Now, he has incurred the wrath of the Crown Prince and the Qin Military. General Meng better pray that he succeeds in his rebellion. Otherwise, your entire household will be executed. I have said my piece and any more words are unnecessary."

Apparently, Meng Ao has no idea that Lu Buwei is behind King Zhuangxiang and Xu Xian's death. His face changing colour, he stammered, "What did you say?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loudly and his laughter carried utmost grief. Ignoring Meng Ao, he stepped out of the house.

Human silhouettes suddenly appeared. The two brothers Meng Wu and Meng Tian leapt out from his left and right respectively. Kneeling down in front of him, they cried out in unison, "Grand Tutor!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Are you eavesdropping on us?"

Their eyes red, they nodded their heads furiously.

Xiang Shaolong went forward and helped them up, whispering, "You must never let your father know about this. Come and look for me after a few days!"

He then left.

Entering the Drunken Wind Brothel, a middle-aged woman who still maintain her complexion fairly well came up to him. Accompanied by four maids, she joyfully welcomed, "Welcome Official Xiang! I am Chunhua (Spring Flower)."

The four maids stepped forward and helped to take off his coat as part of their premium customer service.

Xiang Shaolong plainly questioned, "Has Brothel Owner Wu passed away due to sickness? Why didn't he welcome me personally?"

Chunhua replied awkwardly, "He is indeed unwell and is resting at home. He should be fine after a couple of days of

rest.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly laughed to himself, knowing that Wu Fu has intentionally avoided him and went to beg Lu Buwei to protect his life and business. Turning to the Guardians, he bellowed, “Brothel Owner Wu is treating today. Please go ahead and have as much fun as possible but do remember not to consume any poisonous food or wine.”

Jing Shan and the rest understood his intentions and cheered loudly in unison, squeezing into the inner chambers of the brothel. Chunhua hurriedly ordered more staff to attend to them and at the same time protested in fear, “Official Xiang must be joking. How can there be any poison in our food and wine?”

Keeping his cool, Xiang Shaolong shot back, “You have to ask Miss Guiyan that question. Is she sick too?”

Chunhua lowered her head and softly answered, “She has been reserved by Official Guan and will only accompany him tonight. I have already told Lord Changping.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “So Dan Meimei has been reserved by Premier Mentor?”

Chunhua panicked, “She was reserved by Official Lao.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised and coldly snorted, “I will ask them about this personally. Meanwhile, you better tell Brothel Owner Wu that if I do not see him within one hour, I will close down this brothel and this day next year will be his death anniversary. Hng!”



Sniggering to himself, he strode forward in large steps.

Her face totally devoid of colour, a trembling Chunhua walked in front to guide him.

The banquet destination today is on the second floor of the main brothel building which is also the most luxurious area of the brothel. Unlike the isolated dining building, the second floor holds twenty over tables and is similar to the modern wedding ballroom except that it is much more spacious.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived, more than ten tables are already occupied with numerous people in flamboyant clothes and it was a boisterous scene.

There is a fireplace in every corner of the hall, making the place warm and cosy.

Upon seeing Xiang Shaolong, nearly half of those present rose and paid their respects.

Xiang Shaolong scanned the room quickly and discovered that Guan Zhongxie and Lao Ai are also seated at the VIP area. It may be a simple coincidence or some prearrangement that their two tables are located on the left and right of Lord Changping's table.

What really pissed him off is that Ying Ying is actually seated at Guan Zhongxie's table. With Guiyan, she was seated right beside Guan Zhongxie.

Ying Ying apparently did not expect to see Xiang Shaolong in such a place. Flustered, she lost her bearings and did not

dare to face him.

Xiang Shaolong bore a new hatred, knowing that Guan Zhongxie purposely brought her here to make the Changping brothers and him look bad.

He laughed loudly and waved his hand to show his appreciation at the show of respect. As he walked towards his own table, he noticed Jing Jun was present too and was busy winking at him.

Leaving his companion Dan Meimei, Lao Ai welcomed Xiang Shaolong with a smile, "A rare visitor indeed! I never imagine that I will ever meet Official Xiang in a place like this."

Xiang Shaolong intimately held his arm and pulled him to a nearby fireplace, smiling, "Let me make a wild guess first, Official Lao must have suddenly received Dan Meimei's invitation so you made the trip here tonight. Am I right?"

Lao Ai was blown away, "How in the world did you know that?"

Xiang Shaolong casually replied, "It's easy. I am here tonight to settle some scores with Wu Fu. Dan Meimei and Guiyan are implicated too so they must quickly find someone else to accompany them. If I come into conflict with Official Lao, then we will both fall into Dan Meimei and Lu Buwei's trap. Official Lao should understand what I mean!"

Lao Ai was slightly dazed for a while before gritting his teeth, "How dare that bitch make use of me! I will make her pay for this!"

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and comforted, "Do not get agitated. I just want you to understand. Tonight, based on our friendship, I will not make things difficult for Dan Meimei. Friend, just enjoy your wine!"

Passing by Lao Ai's table, Dan Meimei lowered her head and did not even dare to steal a peep at him.

Seated at the same table are some men who appear to be newly recruited by Lao Ai. They are quite respectful of Xiang Shaolong and their female companions are all eyeing him seductively.

Xiang Shaolong stopped at the table and greeted everyone. He held back his laughter, "After being away for six months, it seems that Meimei has forgotten all about me."

His expression turning ugly, Lao Ai sat down beside Dan Meimei again and hissed, "This is her biggest flaw which is bad memory. No matter what she does, she will forget about it in an instant."

From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that Lao Ai is unhappy with Dan Meimei mainly because Dan Meimei did not tell him that she is quite close to Lu Buwei.

Dan Meimei's tender frame shook slightly and she raised her delicate face, staring at Xiang Shaolong in fear. She begged, "Official Xiang is a powerful figure. I am sure you will not begrudge a weak girl like me. I will be grateful for your kindness towards me."

Xiang Shaolong obviously knew that she is putting on an act

but find it hard to bully her any further. Smirking, he left for his own table.

Guan Zhongxie stood up immediately and laughed, "How can Official Xiang practise favouritism and not come over to our table for an idle chat too?"

Xiang Shaolong swept his gaze over his table. Except for Ying Ying, Guiyan and the serving maids, there is Zhou Zihen, Lu Chan and three new swordsmen. They must be newly recruited by Lu Buwei.

Judging by their strong concentration and muscular body, all three are top swordsmen.

Ying Ying lowered her head even further. On the other hand, Guiyan smiled charmingly as if she had never poisoned him before.

Xiang Shaolong winked at Teng Yi and the rest before he went over to Guan Zhongxie's table.

All the men stood up and greeted him.

Guan Zhongxie smiled, "Let me introduce these three new top swordsmen to you. This is Xu Shang from Shangcai in Chu. He is the number one swordsman there."

Shangcai is a military stronghold northwest of Chu. To be the number one swordsman there is not easy. Xiang Shaolong could not help but assess this twenty-odd year old tall and handsome swordsman.

Clasping his hands, Xu Shang greeted, "I have long heard of

Commander Xiang's famous name. In the future, I must seek your guidance."

Besides him, a stout and beefy man filled with a strong killing aura greeted, "I am Lian Jiao from Wei."

Xiang Shaolong plainly state, "That makes you and Official Guan fellow countrymen."

His eyes shining with cold killing energy, Lian Jiao icily revealed, "Lian Jin is my younger brother."

Guan Zhongxie interrupted, "Official Xiang must not be mistaken. Lian Jiao may be Lian Jin's brother but he only has respect for you for defeating Lian Jin."

Xiang Shaolong's eyes flashed over Lian Jiao and he did not reply.

The final man is tall and thin with a face like a monkey. Among the three men, he is the most collected. He coolly state, "I am Zhao Pu, a Qi native. I was originally serving Prince Xinling in Wei but that was after Official Xiang went to Daliang."

Guiyan encouraged, "Why don't Official Xiang sit down and join us? I can have the honour of toasting you again!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loudly, "Miss Guiyan truly loves to joke. We all know that a wise man will not repeat his mistakes. How can I repeat my mistake then?"

Turning to Guan Zhongxie, he commented, "Official Guan's timing is perfect. The minute you know that I am coming

here tonight, you immediately reserved Miss Guiyan. I think you should bring her home and add her to your private collection. That way, there is no way I can win you.”

Based on Guan Zhongxie’s intelligence and Guiyan’s acting, they were still shocked by Xiang Shaolong’s ‘threatening’ words and their faces lost colour instantly.

Ying Ying could sense the strong animosity between Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie and Guiyan. Shaking uncontrollably, she looked up at Xiang Shaolong’s face.

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “How are you Miss Ying!”

Ying Ying’s eyes glowed with fear and her shoulder trembled slightly. She remained silent.

Xiang Shaolong is not interested in her answer at all. He smiled at Guan Zhongxie, “Why isn’t Miss Niangrong besides Brother Guan as well? I have yet to visit her since my return. I have to bother Brother Guan to send my regards to her.”

Bursting out in laughter, he ignored the hideous expressions of Ying Ying, Guan Zhongxie and Guiyan and returned back to Lord Changping’s table.

## CHAPTER 7

## Fixing A Duel Date

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER Xiang Shaolong got seated, he noticed that Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are seething with anger. First, they are annoyed at Ying Ying's lack of self-respect and secondly, they were displeased at being passed over by Dan Meimei and Guiyan.

At the end of the day, they are members of Qin Royalty. Even if discounting Lord Changping's position as Premier, their posts as the Commanders of the Palace Guards are already one of the most prestigious positions in Xianyang

City.

From this, it shows that Lu Buwei is wielding enormous power in Xianyang City.

Supported by Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can still counter him in the Qin Court but in terms of influence and regarding matters outside the palace, Lu Buwei is the undisputable champion.

Among all the ten odd tables that were occupied, only their table does not have any serving maids.

A shaking Chunhua came up to Xiang Shaolong and gingerly offered, "Shall I get Bailei and Yang Yu to accompany your table?"

Among the top courtesans in the Drunken Wind Brothel, Dan Meimei is the best while the next best three are Guiyan, Bailei and Yang Yu. Lord Changping coldly barked, "Get lost! If Dan Meimei or Guiyan is not coming tonight, the rest of the girls can forget about coming too."

Her face turning deathly pale, Chunhua frantically retreated.

Teng Yi icily shot a look at Guan Zhongxie's table and state in a deep voice, "Guan Zhongxie is here with an ulterior motive. He is out to make us look bad."

Jing Jun leisurely added, "They have another twenty odd men downstairs who all belong to the arrogant group of men terrorizing the Xianyang commoners. If we can teach them a lesson, everyone will only cheer for us."



Xiang Shaolong simply smiled, "That's easy. Jing Shan and the rest are drinking downstairs too. You can tell them to stir up trouble and it is a piece of cake."

Jing Jun was delighted and left to inform them.

Suddenly, a high-pitch protest can be heard from Guan Zhongxie's table and attracted everyone's attention. It was Guan Zhongxie hugging Ying Ying and trying to feed her wine. Ying Ying knew that Xiang Shaolong and the others are watching and refused to yield.

Lord Changping knew that Guan Zhongxie is intentionally provoking them and held back his anger.

Lord Changwen was the one who could not hold it any longer. Standing up, he roared, "Sister! You come over here right now!"

Guan Zhongxie released Ying Ying and folded his arms with a big grin on his face.

Ying Ying stole a look at Xiang Shaolong before lowering her head, "What is it? Let's talk when we get back home!"

Lord Changping is afraid that matters would escalate. Pulling Lord Changwen down to his seat, he sighed, "This is bullshit."

Xiang Shaolong enjoyed a sip of wine and lazily comforted, "The more we get agitated, the cockier Guan Zhongxie becomes. Anyway, I already instructed Wu Fu to come and see me within an hour or I will trash him place. That is Guan Zhongxie's Achilles' Heel"

Hearing this, the two Lords' expression became better looking.

Returning back to his seat, Jing Jun shot Ying Ying an eye and whispered, "Dan'er told me before that this precious sister of our two brothers here is actually in a dilemma. She really loves Third Brother but was afraid of loneliness. Moreover she loves to play and ran into this Casanova. Coupled with Third Brother's absence, she became more and more intertwined with Guan Zhongxie. Look at her eyes if you disbelieve me, there are more pain than joy in them!"

Lord Changping angrily swore, "I just had a big fight with her yesterday. Hei! I am going to be a good Left Premier and do whatever I can to counter Lu Buwei. Let's see how he dies in the end."

Xiang Shaolong checked, "Have you transferred Wang Jian back to the Capital?"

Lord Changwen reported, "It is still being rejected by Lu Buwei. Wang He is also supporting this but was suppressed by Lu Buwei's Meng Ao and Wang Ci. They said that the Xiong Nu are still active and it is better to be safe than sorry. Empress was frightened at hearing this and dare not support Crown Prince so this issue has been dragging on."

Jing Jun groaned, "Huan Yi is worse off! Military spending is controlled by Lu Buwei and his budget has been compromised here and there, restricting his work performance. We must quickly solve this problem for him."

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "Have more patience! When the

Black Dragon appears, it will be the start of his decline. By then, he will be too busy countering Lao Ai.”

Lord Changwen and Jing Jun do not know anything about the Black Dragon and enquired further.

Teng Yi affirmed, “Let’s talk about this later!”

Pointing to his back, he laughed, “Third Brother’s old friend is here.”

Everyone looked to where he is pointing.

True enough, Wu Fu is here.

As he walked over, he greeted and mingled with the other guests as usual without any fear. He seems to be confident with the backing of Guan Zhongxie.

Passing by Lao Ai’s table, this fellow displayed even more intimacy but at Xiang Shaolong’s table, he stood a distance away and reported, “After knowing that Official Xiang is looking for me, I underwent a miracle recovery. Ai! I have let you down as the Spear was being stolen at night and that is the reason for my sickness.”

Everyone glanced at one another after hearing his words, thinking that this man is outrageously irresponsible. But this must be Lu Buwei’s and Guan Zhongxie’s idea to not let Xiang Shaolong have the spear no matter what. Without their support, Wu Fu will never display such insolence.

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied, “Since the treasure is lost, I have the responsibility to investigate this crime. Brother

Owner Wu must now come back with me to the Command Centre and provide all the evidence. I will get my Cavalry Army to get the Spear back at all costs.”

Wu Fu’s face lost some colour and could foresee his own death at the Command Centre. He hurriedly countered, “I appreciate Commander Xiang’s efforts but I have decided not to pursue this matter. Moreover, it was stolen on the night I presented it to you and it is more than six months ago.”

Jing Jun barked, “How dare you! The Spear belongs to Commander Xiang and who are you to decide if this matter should be pursued or not? You are obviously trying to make things difficult for us. You must have had a hand in this matter and is now trying to cover your tracks.”

Lord Changping coldly interjects, “According to the Great Laws of Qin, failure to report a crime is punishable by execution. Brothel Owner Wu is showing disrespect to our laws and is hiding this crime. This is unforgiveable and death is too light for you.”

All the colour gone from his face, Wu Fu’s legs turned to jelly and he knelt down on the ground but his eyes were looking at Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie did not expect Xiang Shaolong and company to turn Wu Fu’s words against himself. Standing up, he offered, “As the Imperial Infantry Commander, I am in charge of all matters within the City. Will Official Xiang please hand this matter to me and I will give you a

satisfactory reply.”

Everyone in the hall can feel the animosity in the air. All the activities have stopped and everyone is paying attention to the proceedings.

The hall is completely silent and the atmosphere is filled with Guan Zhongxie’s domineering voice.

Lord Changping smiled, “Just by looking at the time of the theft, we can deduce that the criminal has something against Official Xiang and there must be a spy involved. Moreover, the spear may have been transported out of the City by now. As Premier, I think Official Xiang must handle this matter personally. Official Guan need not trouble yourself.”

Based on Guan Zhongxie’s calm demeanour, his face did not change colour at all. He knew that Lord Changping is the Left Premier of Qin and is many ranks higher than him. Moreover, he is in charge of the Qin military administration. If Guan Zhongxie continues to speak out, it is equivalent to insubordination.

Because of these factors, Guan Zhongxie was momentarily speechless.

Thinking about his imminent execution, Wu Fu’s teeth begin to chatter and his entire body was shaking.

Ying Ying’s position has always been undefined. Now, she finally realised that Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie are on extreme opposing ends against Xiang Shaolong, her two brothers and the Crown Prince. Stuck in the centre, she was in an

awkward situation and could not help but felt regretful.

In this moment, Dan Meimei rose from her seat and came to Wu Fu's side. Kneeling down too, she declared in a shrill voice, "If the charge is not reporting a known crime, then everyone in this brothel is guilty. Premier and Commander Xiang can punish all of us."

Guiyan hurriedly came over and kneeled on the other side of Wu Fu.

Now, it is Lord Changping and the rest who are in a tight situation. It is hard for them to persecute the entire brothel occupants over a petty theft.

Lao Ai is feeling uncomfortable too. After all, Dan Meimei is his woman. If Xiang Shaolong executed her, he would lose face too.

Guan Zhongxie returned back to his seat and there was a cold smirk hanging at the edge of his mouth. He wanted to see how Xiang Shaolong is able to clean up the present mess.

Still maintaining his leisurely and aloof expression, Xiang Shaolong simply state, "There is a debtor behind every debt. Wu Fu is the main instigator behind the entire episode. He was the one who gave me the spear and since the spear is lost, he should be the one who informed me. Now, he did not report the loss to me and is being uncooperative now so we are charging him with being a possible accomplice. I wonder why are the two ladies insisting on shouldering the same blame; is there something more than meets the eye?"

Dan Meimei and Guiyan did not expect Xiang Shaolong to have such a sharp tongue and were dumbfounded.

Wu Fu knew that things have gone terribly wrong and he was in an extreme state of anxiety. He stammered, "Please give me some time. I am sure I can retrieve the Flying Dragon Spear."

Teng Yi laughed loudly, "In this case, the spear and shield must have been hidden by Brothel Owner Wu himself. Otherwise, you would not dare to make such a commitment!"

Wu Fu knew that he has slipped. Knocking his head on the floor repeatedly, he begged, "It is all my fault! It is all my fault!"

Guan Zhongxie and his men were filled with hatred, wishing they could tear Wu Fu into pieces.

Lao Ai interrupted, "Will Official Xiang be forgiving and forget this episode if Brothel Owner Wu manages to hand over the spear and shield?"

Taking this chance to stand down, Xiang Shaolong agreed, "Since Official Lao has spoken, I shall accept this suggestion."

Lao Ai gestured and two of his men stood up and lifted Wu Fu away.

Dan Meimei and Guiyan finally got a taste of Xiang Shaolong's prowess. Slowly flashing their eyes at him, they returned back to their seats.

Before they managed to sit down, sounds of fighting and cutlery smashing can be heard from the ground floor.

Xiang Shaolong and his friends smiled, knowing that Jing Shan and his men has begun causing trouble.

The main hall at the ground floor was in a complete mess as if a hurricane has just passed by. The ground was littered with broken furniture, cutlery, spilled wine and dishes.

Half of the Eighteen Guardians were slightly injured but their enemies are in a pathetic state. All the twenty three warriors of Guan Zhongxie were heavily injured and more than half of them are unconscious. Although there were no fatal injuries among them, everyone suffered from broken bones and fractured joints. This shows that Wu Yanzhu and his fellow Guardians have been lenient.

Witnessing the armageddon before his eyes, Guan Zhongxie bellowed, "What in the world happened?"

One of the men who is supposedly the leader of the men stood out. With one hand nursing his bleeding nose, he pointed at Jing Shan and reported, "This kid exchanged a flirtatious look with one of our ladies. So we..."

Guan Zhongxie roared, "Shut up!"

Wu Guang shrugged his shoulders at Xiang Shaolong, declaring, "They are the ones who attacked first. We are only defending ourselves!"

Guan Zhongxie knew that Jing Shan and the rest are intentionally out to cause trouble but was powerless to do



anything as it was his men who attacked first.

Ying Ying slipped away and stood in between her two elder brothers. The two Lords treated her as if she was invisible and did not even acknowledge her presence.

Guan Zhongxie commanded his men to carry the injured away and apologised solemnly to Xiang Shaolong. He coldly invited, "During the hunting festival, we had a duel that ended in a draw. May I know when are you free to exchange pointers again and also decide Third Mistress's future?"

The noisy crowd of onlookers and brothel guests immediately became quiet.

Everyone knew that Guan Zhongxie is really incensed and took this chance to challenge Xiang Shaolong.

Duelling is forbidden among military officers but this matter concerns Lu Niangrong's hand in marriage and there was a precedent so even Xiao Pan cannot interfere with this duel.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Official Guan can fix the time and place. Even if you want to duel now, I will be happy to comply."

Everyone's attention turned to Guan Zhongxie.

Before Guan Zhongxie can say a single word, Ying Ying screamed and tore to the front. Standing in between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie, she protested, "Please do not fight!"

Everyone was puzzled.

In Xianyang City, Ying Ying is known for her fighting skills. Moreover, she loves challenging people to fights and enjoys watching others fight too. Now, her violent objection makes it hard for everyone to comprehend her motives.

Xiang Shaolong simply shrugged his shoulders, "I am not the one pushing for this duel. If Miss Ying wishes to stop this fight, you can speak to Official Guan privately. Please forgive me for being unable to help you."

Ying Ying looked at him intimately and replied in a grieved voice, "When two tigers fight, severe injuries will be inflicted. You can choose not to accept the challenge and no one can force you. You must purposely say these provoking words to anger me. After all the trouble tonight, aren't you very imposing already?"

Annoyed, Xiang Shaolong coldly laughed, "Is Miss trying to stop the fight because we are not fighting over you?"

Stomping her foot fiercely once on the floor, with a loud Wah! Ying Ying broke out into tears and ran non-stop towards the door.

Teng Yi winked at Jing Jun and Jing Jun hurriedly chased after her.

Still maintaining his composure, Guan Zhongxie casually state, "The twentieth of next month is Premier Mentor Lu's birthday. We shall have out duel then and add to the festivities too."

Footsteps are sounded and Lao Ai's men returned with Wu

Fu carrying the Flying Dragon Spear and shield.

Receiving the spear and shield, Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly, "It is settled then. On that day, I shall use this spear to test your formidable skills."

The onlookers burst out in wild cheering.

Guan Zhongxie's face lost some colour. Since the last fight, he has already figured out Xiang Shaolong's sword skills and has been working hard over the past six months to counter it. Now, Xiang Shaolong is using a spear instead of a sword so all his hard work has just gone down the drain.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing secretly inside.

He has more than one month to train until the duel date. He is confident of learning Yanran's invincible spear skills.

Only with this kind of heavy attacking weapon can he successfully counter Guan Zhongxie's amazing arm strength.

This is called flexibility in warfare.

He has depended on strategy to win the last fight and it will also be strategy that he needs to win this fight.

There is no other way out.

## CHAPTER 8

## Expressing Love

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE next day, Xiang Shaolong went to pay his respects to Lu Gong and Xu Xian before entering the palace to see Xiao Pan to report his duel with Guan Zhongxie. Finally, he went to see Qin Qing at the Qin Residence.

Qin Qing is in her garden admiring the snow and was delighted to receive him but shy at the same time. Hesitating to look straight into his eyes, she simply swept him off his feet.

Strolling in the snow shoulder to shoulder, there were no

intimate actions but they can both feel the intimacy in each others' heart.

Xiang Shaolong gently revealed, "At Lu Buwei's birthday dinner next month is the day I will fight Guan Zhongxie to death."

Shocked, Qin Qing wailed, "You! Why did you have to fight him?"

Xiang Shaolong answered, "This man is talented, intelligent and is holding the post of the Imperial Infantry Commander. If I do not eliminate him, we will have many days of trouble in the future."

Lowering her hood, Qin Qing halted and whined, "If you lose... Ai! I am so worried."

Xiang Shaolong turned around and leaned his head towards her, scrutinizing her flawless beauty and smiled, "If I happened to forfeit my life during the duel, what will you do?"

Her face becoming pale, Qin Qing shook, "Please do not speak like this. Do you think I am not frightened already?"

Xiang Shaolong insisted, "Grand Tutor Qin has yet to reply me."

Qin Qing shot him a look and lowered her head, replying softly, "I will join you in death! Happy?"

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, "Grand Tutor Qin!"

Qin Qing shook her head and sighed, "To think I will actually

say such things to a man. But I know you will not lose, right? Xiang Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Of course I will not lose! If I am not confident, I will just admit my loss. What can he do about it?"

Pausing, he added, "I am here today to sincerely invite Grand Tutor Qin to stay at the farm for a month. Because I need to disregard everything and focus on training to prepare for the duel next month. But I know I cannot forget about you and to avoid the pain of pining for you, I have to request that you be by my side."

In an instant, even the root of Qin Qing's ears is completely red. Lowering her head embarrassedly, she clarified, "Xiang Shaolong, do you know that by making this request, it is as good as asking me to marry you?"

Xiang Shaolong reached out and held her white and tender shoulders before gently replying, "Of course I know. Please forgive my callousness but I want to win both your heart and your body. If either one is lacking, I will not accept it."

Qin Qing struggled slightly and wailed, "Are you treating me like a piece of merchandise?"

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward and kissed her cheek, slowly saying, "Whatever. I just want you. We need not deceive ourselves any longer in the future and live life with so many restrictions. Some opportunities are lost forever if they are missed. I have thought very carefully and thoroughly before I come looking for you."

Qin Qing's head is so low that it is almost touching her chest. Whispering as soft as a mosquito, she asked, "When are you leaving for the farm?"

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed, "Early tomorrow morning."

Qin Qing softly pleaded, "Can you release me first?"

Stunned, Xiang Shaolong released his grip on her.

Qin Qing floated away like the breeze and finally stopped at a distance ten feet away from him. She officially state, "I will wait for you here tomorrow! See you then."

Giving him a romantic and emotional look, she turned around and sashayed away.

An intoxicated Xiang Shaolong stared at her until she disappeared among the flower beds before composing himself and headed towards the Command Centre.

At the Command Centre main door, someone dashed out and detained him. It turned out to be Ying Ying and from her haggard expression, she must have had a bad night's sleep. She started, "Official Xiang, I must speak to you privately."

Xiang Shaolong has just expressed his love for Qin Qing and gotten the most wonderful answer. In a great mood, he nodded, "Let's talk more inside!"

Ying Ying stubbornly shook her head, "No! Let's take a walk outside the city!"

Alarm bells begin to ring in Xiang Shaolong's head. With Xu Xian and Lu Gong dead, he is the man Lu Buwei wanted to

kill next. Will this be a trap laid by Guan Zhongxie but executed through Ying Ying?

He decided otherwise because no matter how muddle-headed Ying Ying becomes, she will never harm him. He agreed, "All right!"

Turning around, he was about to instruct the Guardians to wait for him at the Command Centre when Wu Yanzhu stated upfront, "Master Xiang, please forgive us for being unable to comply. The Madams have strictly instructed us to never leave your side."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and relented, "Fine! You can follow behind me."

He proceeded to ride with Ying Ying out of the city.

Riding out of the city gates, his spirits lifted considerably.

The rolling meadows have become a blanket of white snow and they spread out as far as the eye can see. Mother Nature is completely silent and only the snow is shimmering.

The Eighteen Guardians were riding two hundred steps behind them and were taking precautions against any ambushes.

Xiang Shaolong assessed Ying Ying.

Her charming body is even more mesmerizing which is probably due to Guan Zhongxie's nourishment.

Xiang Shaolong wondered how will the already peerless beautiful Qin Qing turn out after his own nourishment?



With this thought running through his head, Xiang Shaolong is more certain than ever than he is only interested in Ying Ying as a friend and not as a lover.

Ying Ying softly asked, "Xiang Shaolong! Please do not fight Zhongxie. As long as you publicly announce that you do not wish to marry Lu Niangrong and thus rejected the duel, no one will say that you are afraid of him."

Xiang Shaolong agreed that this is an excellent solution. Moreover, he did appear superior during the hunting fair and with marriage as an excuse; no one will think that he is trying to avoid this fight. The problem is that he and Guan Zhongxie has already reached the point of no return, where neither can tolerate the presence of each other.

Just like him and Lu Buwei, only one man can continue living.

Not receiving a reply from him, Ying Ying raised her voice angrily, "You do not love Lu Niangrong, what is the use of fighting over her?"

Xiang Shaolong was admiring the snow accumulated on the branches of the trees along the official roads. He lightly sighed, "Miss is really protective of Guan Zhongxie. Whatever you do is in his best interests."

Ying Ying noticed the sarcasm in his voice and was incensed, "Do you think I am not looking after your interests too? While you are away for the past six months, Zhongxie has been practising his sword every day and was waiting for the day he could kill you. Do you think you can still defeat him?"

Xiang Shaolong did not take her words to heart and smiled, "So who do you think will win?"

Ying Ying was so angry her entire face is completely white. She cursed, "I wish both of you are dead."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly, "Let's return back to the City. You need not say any more."

Stopping her horse, Ying Ying's face is completely green by now. Staring at him furiously for some time, she softened and intimately coaxed, "It is all my fault for being indecisive. No wonder you are treating me like this. Please listen to me this time, ok?"

Xiang Shaolong seriously state, "Ying Ying, you better come back to your senses and look clearly at the harsh realities in front of you. This is not a personal feud but a fight that concerns the power struggle of the Qin Court and a competition between Qin natives and foreigners. The losing party will stand to have their families annihilated. To Guan Zhongxie, you are just one of his pawns but you are only good at disobeying your brothers' orders to restrict you for your own good. Did you ever spare a thought for them? You are only stubborn, wilful and want others to pander to your selfish needs."

Pausing for a while, he proudly remarked, "Death and defeat is common during fights and this is not the first time Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie are trying to kill me. But you only choose to live in your fantasy world and ignore genuine concerns. If you ever marry Guan Zhongxie, you better pray

that Lu Buwei can successfully rebel but that would mean a tragic death for both your brothers. If Lu Buwei fails, you may be spared but all your kids with Guan Zhongxie will be executed. This is the truth and Crown Prince Zheng will not waver. All these circumstances are born out of Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie and Mo Ao's schemes. Mo Ao is dead so now Guan Zhongxie is trying to kill me. Do you understand?"

Not paying any more attention to her, he left and re-entered the city.

Before he reached the Command Centre, Xiang Shaolong's mind is already filled with Qin Qing. Imagining that he can get close to her physically tomorrow, his heart is burning with passion and he wished that time could pass faster.

At the Command Centre, Teng Yi whispered, "Tu Xian will meet you at the usual place later."

Xiang Shaolong was elated, "I was about to look for him!"

Sitting down, Teng Yi reported, "After winter, Meng Ao will attack Han. Your old friend Han Chuang is in trouble."

Xiang Shaolong helplessly replied, "This is something beyond our control. If we are weak, Han will be attacking us instead. But as long as we are building the Zhengguo Canal, we will lack the resources for a grand campaign. For the next few years, we can only gain one or two provinces from the Three Allied States. By the time they really mount a campaign against the East, we would be long gone."

Teng Yi sighed, "I know that Third Brother has no interest in

war but sooner or later, you will have to field an army too. This is something inevitable.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “I have to depend on Second Brother then. I am sure that you are so familiar with the Mozi warfare that you can even memorise it from the back to the front.”

Teng Yi laughed, “You really love to exaggerate.”

Xiang Shaolong inquired, “Is Little Jun out on patrol?”

Teng Yi chided, “He is not so diligent and is out with Lu Dan’er. I told him that you are willing to propose marriage on his behalf and he was so happy that he forgot all about work.”

Xiang Shaolong decided, “The Lu Family is still in bereavement. Let’s talk about this after I killed Guan Zhongxie! I am going back to the farm tomorrow. Second Brother must spar with me if you are free.”

Teng Yi suddenly recalled something, “Shaolong, do you remember the Weinan Martial Arts School?”

Xiang Shaolong searched his mental database and remembered this Martial Arts School was run by this man called Qiu Risheng. In the past, he was conspiring with Lord Yangquan and once sent one of his top fighters ‘Scarface’ Guoxin to ambush Jing Jun and injured him badly. He himself was almost assassinated by them on the streets.

He nodded, “What about them?”

Teng Yi explained, "After Lord Yangquan was eliminated by Lu Buwei, Qiu Risheng sensed that times are unfavourable so he slipped away. Recently, he resurfaced and is conspiring with Lao Ai. He has been quite prominent lately and is heavily recruiting warriors. Little Jun is itching to lay his hands on them. I am sure there will be some conflict sooner or later."

Xiang Shaolong knew better than anyone that Lao Ai is a despicable cad and expected him to conspire with other ruthless men. He plainly stressed, "Second Brother must watch Little Jun carefully and we must not act rashly. We will only counter them when the Black Dragon shows itself and we have consolidated our power."

Teng Yi smiled, "Leave this to me. Little Jun has never disobeyed my orders. Third Brother is sharp indeed to predict that Lao Ai will be dissatisfied with his lowly position and possess wild ambitions. For him to accommodate Qiu Risheng, it is as good as clashing with Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong nodded, "When the Crown Prince has consolidated his power, he will have Lord Changping and Li Si to advise him, Wang Jian and Huan Yi to lead his army. With the Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry in their hands, we can retreat back to the farm and watch Lu Buwei and Lao Ai fight to death."

Teng Yi frowned, "But if this goes on, the Empress and Crown Prince will be enemies one day."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled, "This is fate which nobody

can change. We are helpless too.”

Teng Yi was about to say something when an attendant reported that Wang Ci sent someone to summon Xiang Shaolong to see him at the General Residence.

Both men were stunned as Wang Ci did not have any dealings with Xiang Shaolong.

Arriving at the General Residence, Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians noticed that the courtyard in front of the main building was loud and lively. There were nearly a hundred strong men watching Wang Ci practise his archery.

Despite the cold and frosty weather, Wang Ci braved the chill and mounted his strong bow. His three continuous arrows hit the bull’s eyes and earned loud cheers from the crowd. This Great General truly lives up to his reputation as one of Qin’s famed general. Noticing Xiang Shaolong, he smiled broadly and waved to him. Putting on a fur coat and his shining eyes assessing Jing Shan and the Guardians, he casually remarked, “I heard that these Guardians are very highly skilled. Since they are free, why don’t they exchange a few friendly pointers with my men?”

Xiang Shaolong is in no position to reject him and agreed reluctantly.

Wang Ci smiled and led him into the main hall.

The hall is wide and spacious while the walls are decorated with animal skins and weapons. There is a killing aura in the air.

The strangest thing is a seven facade screen south of the hall. The screen has completely blocked the incoming path from within the building. It looks out of place and Xiang Shaolong is reminded of the time when he was peeping at Chu Empress Dowager Li Yanyan. He was discovered by her because of a footprint on the floor so he naturally looked towards the floor. Immediately, sweat poured down his back and his limbs became icy cold.

There were many water marks on the floor. Needless to say, there are many men who have entered the hall from outside and are now hidden behind the screen. As their shoes are tainted with snow, the water marks are left on the floor. They were there because he has arrived and this is a setup meant for him.

They naturally do not have any good intentions.

All they need to do is to push the screen over and shoot out with their crossbows and he will be a dead man.

Wang Ci took up the host seat right in front of the screen and gestured him to sit down on his right. There is no way that he can make the first move and attack Wang Ci first.

His mind thinking furiously, he gritted his teeth and sat down. In the process, he secretly retrieved five flying needles and hid them in his giant hand.

He has never been so close to death.

Wang Ci is truly intelligent to get his men to occupy the Guardians so that he is alone and defenceless.

Why does Wang Ci want to kill him?

Wang Ci is unlike Meng Ao and is a Qin native. He may be an admirer of Lu Buwei but will eventually be loyal to Xiao Pan.

Thinking about this, he had an inspiration.

Two maids came up to serve tea and excused themselves. When only the two of them are left, Wang Ci suspiciously assessed him for a while before sighing, "This year has been pretty eventful. First, Lord Gaoling rebelled and Xu Xian and Lu Gong died one after another. I find it hard to accept these facts myself."

Xiang Shaolong does not understand the meaning behind his words so he kept his silence.

Pain shooting out of his eyes, Wang Ci lamented, "It is Lu Gong's dream to see Qin conquer the six eastern states and unite the world. Just when things are taking a positive turn, his life ended. This is truly tragic."

Xiang Shaolong could not help but added, "As long as we are having internal conflict, it is impossible for us to unite the world."

His eyes flashing, Wang Ci mentioned in a deep voice, "This is the reason why I looked for Shaolong. Since Premier Mentor came to Qin, he conquered Eastern Zhou with General Meng Ao and built the three new provinces. Those are strategic locations and now, we are able to threaten Daliang and show off our might to the eastern states. If not for this campaign, it is difficult for Meng Ao and me to attack



the three Allied States and conquer Taiyuan from Zhao. When the Five Allied Army came to attack us, it was thanks to Shaolong's trickery that Prince Xinling was forced to step down and our danger passed. After that, Lu Gong, Meng Ao and I attacked the Allied States and established the Eastern Provinces. Now, Qin is even more prestigious than before. But right at this point in time, our country is rocked by internal strife and our hands are tied. Shaolong, what do you think we should do?"

Xiang Shaolong finally understood that Wang Ci is trying to mend fences between him and Lu Buwei. He is away fighting most of the time and is not clear about the power struggles in the Qin Court. Ultimately, he has declared his loyalty to Lu Buwei and it is hard to convince him to switch sides. If Xiang Shaolong insisted on his way, the attackers behind the screen may just kill him without the least hesitation. At the same time, he can tell that Wang Ci is not blindly following Lu Buwei's orders.

After some contemplation, he calmly replied, "In the present times, everyone remembers Tian Dan when we speak of Qi, Empress Han Jing when we speak of Zhao and Lu Buwei when we speak of Qin. The Kings of these states seemed to be non-existent. This is called, Thick trees carry thick branches, remove the branches and the tree is powerless. With officials carrying too much power, the King of the State is powerless like the branchless tree..."

He just learned the last four lines from Li Si and managed to put them to good use in this desperate situation.

An impatient Wang Ci interrupted, "This is due to circumstances and not the will of men. The King is young and the country is powerful. Without officials managing the state, the country will be ruined. We have adopted the policy of utilising talented men, paying them handsomely and given them critical posts. Since Xiao gong begun our dynasty, we have capable men like Shang Yang, Zhang Yi, Fan Qiao and now we have Premier Mentor. If not for them, Qin will not enjoy our present success today."

Xiang Shaolong comprehended Wang Ci's train of thought and was wondering if he should tell him about Lu Buwei murdering King Zhuangxiang and Xu Xian when Wang Ci continued, "Lu Gong and Xu Xian has always suspected Premier Mentor of poisoning the two late kings and even suspected that Crown Prince Zheng is Lu Buwei and Empress Ji's illegitimate son. It is now proven that Crown Prince Zheng is not related to Lu Buwei so all these are just blatant rumours."

Xiang Shaolong was blown away, realising that behind every gain, there is a loss too. The blood test has indirectly caused Wang Ci to not suspect Lu Buwei the traitor at all. In turn, he has become the main culprit in Wang Ci's eyes and a stumbling block in the way of Qin's unification of the world.

Wang Ci sighed again, "Premier Mentor is a most talented individual. Just by reading his Spring-Autumn Annals and his reward hanging on the city gates, I believe he has surpassed Shang Yang."

Xiang Shaolong decided to show hand, "How can there be any piece of work that is so good that it cannot be improved on? I think people fear his authority and dared not correct his work. There is something I will say but I am afraid that you will not believe me. Xu Xian may be killed by Chu but it was instigated by Tian Dan. Now why would Tian Dan do such a thing? We only need to do some self-reflection and ask ourselves, Who will gain the most from his death in Qin? I believe General can easily guess who the mastermind is."

Wang Ci was shaken, "Do you have any proof?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled, "How am I going to produce any proof? But Lu Gong was so incensed over this murder he died of anger. On his deathbed, he begged Crown Prince and me to avenge him. Given the present circumstances, General must choose to be loyal to Crown Prince or Lu Buwei. There is no other choice. Lu Buwei has been propagating his Spring-Autumn Annals because he wanted to spread the influence of Officials holding power. If I possess any selfish motives against Lu Buwei, I would not have rejected the position of Premier twice and allowed others to be promoted."

He is on the brink of death and did not bother to conceal any details.

Wang Ci's face changed colour and his eyes shone sharply, scanning him with suspicion.

Xiang Shaolong coldly exchanged stares with him with neither hostility nor fear. In his mind, he was thinking of how

to flip the table to block the arrows and escape with his life.

Wang Ci's gaze shifted up and he stared at the main pillar supporting the hall. His eyes are filled with contemplation and he unsteadily commented, "Xu Xian, Lu Gong and I have always admired you Xiang Shaolong. Otherwise, I would not have asked you over for a discussion. For the time being, I am unable to agree with your theories. Nonetheless, my loyalties lie with the Crown Prince. I will try to talk to Premier Mentor personally and hope that he will not end up like Shang Yang who is executed by five horses running in five separate directions and tearing his body apart."

Xiang Shaolong was astonished, "You must never do this. If Lu Buwei senses that General is having doubts about him, he will try to get rid of you. All I desire is for General to follow your righteous principles and support all the policies that will benefit our country. That is a blessing to us already."

Wang Ci was moved, "Shaolong, you are definitely not an unscrupulous man. If you are trying to convince me to turn against Lu Buwei, you will not leave here alive. Meng Ao has told Lu Buwei everything you told him today. Based on that, you have displayed insubordination and Lu Buwei can actually annihilate your household."

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief at this close shave. He has been too reckless and did not expect Meng Ao to be dead loyal to Lu Buwei. It is also clear that Wang Ci has been ordered by Lu Buwei to kill him.

If Wang Ci is his killer, even Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji are

powerless to hold it against him.

Wang Ci bitterly laughed, "So I can either choose to kill you or fight beside you. There is no third option. If I join hands with Meng Ao, you are just a measly Cavalry Commander who cannot resist us. But relax! You did not try to get me to counter Lu Buwei but Lu Buwei is dead set on killing you. But as long as I disagreed, he dare not act on his own. Hng! If I choose to take precautions against him, what can he do about it?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief but could not resist clarifying, "I thought General mentioned that it is hard to accept my theories. Why did you still change your mind?"

His eyes shining with humour, he warmly answered, "Because I suddenly remembered that Shaolong came to see me without any reservations and speak with reason in a guilt-free manner. In addition, the late King, Crown Prince, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Wang He, Lord Changping and Wang Jian have all treated you with trust, love and respect. It is all because of your selfless attitude. So I was suddenly enlightened and did not commit a serious error. I still have my doubts about your words but I will not trust Lu Buwei as whole-heartedly as before."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling emotional.

In this moment, he knows that the power vacuum left behind with the deaths of Xu Xian and Lu Gong is now being filled by Wang Ci who has miraculously switched sides to support them. Otherwise, it is hard for him to stay alive, not

to mention deal with Lu Buwei.

Wang Ci has abandoned his plan to kill him as he finally realises that Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei has come to a stage of non-reconciliation. At the end of the day, he has chosen to support his own King. After all, he is a Qin native and would never conspire with outsiders to harm his own country.

## CHAPTER 9

## A Startling Discovery

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER listening to his near-death account at Wang Ci's residence, Xiao Pan sighed with relief, "That was too close!"

For the longest time, Xiang Shaolong hasn't seen him expressing genuine concern and was touched. He gladly added, "There is a reason behind everything. If not for you, Xu Xian and Lu Gong supporting me, Wang Ci would have killed me without giving me a chance to speak out. Moreover, the Qin military has always been loyal to the Crown Prince and thus, Wang Ci is able to abandon the dark

side and join us. Otherwise, it is hard to overcome Lu Buwei indeed! Ai! Maybe this is what we call fate.”

Xiao Pan nodded, “Master must quickly work on the Black Dragon before Lu Buwei has the chance to transfer Wang Ci away. Meng Ao alone is more than enough to deal with you. Ai! Does Master really need to retreat to the farms? I am concerned that Lu Buwei may send his warriors to attack the farm. If he gets his men to be disguised as horse thieves, it is hard for me to pin the blame on him”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly astounded. At the same time, he resolved to increase his defences and put more emphasis on spying and intelligence gathering. Otherwise, his household may be annihilated. Moreover, he has to send half his Wu Family Elite Army to the northern border to support Wu Zhuo.

Xiao Pan remarked with frustration, “Using the excuse that the Zhengguo Canal is lacking funds, he has been delaying money shipments to Huan Yi’s new army. Up till today, they are only able to recruit one thousand men and did not have proper armour or weapons. Otherwise, I would get them to relocate near the farms and support you if necessary.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “Crown Prince can put your mind at ease. I have sufficient strength to protect myself. With Wang Ci countering Lu Buwei and Meng Ao, there is only so much they can do. No matter what, we must try our best to keep Wang Ci in Xianyang City before the Black Dragon sighting to check Lu Buwei’s influence.”



Xiao Pan sighed helplessly and changed the topic, "This morning, Empress summoned me and gave me a tongue-lashing, chiding me for keeping secrets from her. I am so pissed. She is not behaving herself and she doesn't deserve my respect. A mother like her is as good as none."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the gap between him and Zhu Ji is widening, forcing Zhu Ji to be increasingly reliant on Lao Ai. The real reason is that Xiao Pan is influenced by Lady Ni's image of a self-respecting mother and cannot tolerate Zhu Ji and Lao Ai's scandalous relationship.

Only he would really understand this circumstance.

Xiao Pan inquired, "Is Master ready to marry Grand Tutor Qin? She came to inform Empress and me earlier that she is going to stay at the farm with you for a month or so. Hei! I am really happy for you. If Lao Ai or Lu Buwei ends up with her, I will vomit blood."

Xiang Shaolong understood that Xiao Pan has shifted his affections and respect to Qin Qing.

Lady Ni's death is the biggest lack in Xiao Pan's life. First, Zhu Ji took her place, followed by Qin Qing, providing him with a motherly figure in his life.

Xiao Pan cheerfully revealed, "For the past six months, Lao Ai and Lu Buwei have been creating opportunities to be close to her. Fortunately, Grand Tutor Qin ignored all their advances. Hee! Grand Tutor Qin loves talking to me and she always tells me how heroic you are! Hng! Lu Buwei has been offering me many beauties but they have all been rejected

by me. I will not be tricked by him!”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “If I marry Grand Tutor Qin, not only Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will be jealous to death but I will also incur the wrath of many people.”

Xiao Pan shook his head, “Times have changed. Now, Master has become the heroic icon of Qin. When Master fields an army and win a few gaddamn bloody battles, I can confer Master to be a Lord or a Marquis. At that point in time, no one can voice any dissatisfaction if you marry Grand Tutor Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Those vulgarities must have been suppressed in your heart for a long time! We shall speak of this later. When the Black Dragon is sighted, we will use this chance to change the palace administration. Is Crown Prince going to promote Li Si to be the Administrative Premier?”

Xiao Pan thought for a while and frowned, “I am afraid that Empress will not support my decision! If possible, I would want Master to take up this post.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big fright and is certain that he could not live up to the expectations of this post. He hurriedly suggested, “I think I am more suited to hold a military post. Relax! The power of the Black Dragon is without question. I have already sent my men to invite Zou Yan back to Xianyang City. When he personally announces that Crown Prince is the new Chosen One, it will be an earth-shattering event and even Empress cannot object. By then, Crown Prince can assume full authority and we can watch Empress

and Lao Ai fight Lu Buwei. On your coronation day, we will eliminate all of them in one blow.”

Xiao Pan bitterly smiled, “But that is the day Master will leave me.”

Xiang Shaolong seriously advised, “We are earthshaking figures and do not focus on such petty matters. As long as you utilise Li Si and Wang Jian well, you can unite the world. Crown Prince must forget everything about me and the shadow of your past will be gone forever.”

Xiao Pan’s red reddened and he gasped, “Why is Master so good to me? You are absolutely selfless.”

Xiang Shaolong muttered, “You know the reason better than anyone.”

Xiao Pan was very touched, “I understand. Actually, I have regarded Master as my Father a long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden strong urge to burst out crying. From a nameless Zhao boy to become the awe-inspiring Qin Shi Huang who will unite the whole of China is already something unimaginable.

Moreover, he shared such an intimate relationship with him.

In this instant, an attendant came to report that the Empress has summoned Xiang Shaolong.

Both men exchanged a glance, guessing that the matter is probably related to Qin Qing.

Zhu Ji received him in the tranquil inner hall of the Empress

Palace. After dismissing her attendants, she stood up and walked to Xiang Shaolong's front and assessed him for some time. Finally, she gently asked, "Xiang Shaolong, please be honest with me. In what ways am I inferior to Qin Qing?"

Xiang Shaolong can feel trouble brewing. Whenever women become jealous, they are simply irrational. The more peaceful Zhu Ji's appearance is, the angrier she is. In a subservient tone, he meekly replied, "Empress must not be mistaken. Grand Tutor Qin is going to the farms to keep Yanran company. It is not what Empress is thinking."

Zhu Ji stared at him ferociously for some time before turning around. She sighed, "Does Shaolong still wishes to deceive me? As a woman, I know what other women are thinking. Just by her joyful expression, anyone with brains can guess what is going on. Now, Crown Prince and you are both treating me like strangers, right?"

Xiang Shaolong had a strong desire to hug Zhu Ji's voluptuous body into his arms but tried his very best to control himself. He gently comforted, "Empress is thinking too much. The Crown Prince and I are still full of respect for you just like before."

Zhu Ji intimately shook her head, "It is no longer the same! Ai! What wrong did I commit that Heaven must punish me this way? All my men wanted to desert me and now, even my son is disregarding me."

Xiang Shaolong had to agree with her words. First, Lu Buwei gave her to King Zhuangxiang. With his death, she was

‘given’ to Lao Ai and because of this, Xiao Pan is disregarding her. She may enjoy plenty of power as the Empress but she is certainly not happy.

What else can he say?

Zhu Ji viciously turned around and her expression was frosty. She swore, “Xiang Shaolong. I am utterly disappointed with you. In the future, do not expect me to support you like before.”

Xiang Shaolong realised that all her love for him has been transformed into hatred instead. If not for Lao Ai, Zhu Ji would not be so heartless. Lao Ai may appear friendly to him but must be trying to sow discord between him and Zhu Ji. After all, Lao Ai is just a despicable cad.

Unable to hold his anger, he coldly retorted, “Empress is overreacting. Since we met in Handan City, everything I did was for the sake of Empress and Crown Prince. I don’t think I deserve your berating.”

Zhu Ji blew her top, “How dare you! How dare you use your past achievements to threaten me!”

Blowing his top too, Xiang Shaolong furiously exclaimed, “When did I ever use my past achievements to threaten you? Do I ask you for any special assistance before? Feel free to quote one example!”

Zhu Ji was tongue tied and her face changed colour. She challenged, “Who do you think you are to talk to me in such a manner?”

Xiang Shaolong angrily shot back, "You are the Empress and I am just a lowly official. I am not fit to talk to you. But Empress knows in your heart how I truly feel about you. I am restricted by circumstances and could not betray the late King's gratitude. Thus, I did not dare to get close to you but you have described me to be an ingrate today. What did I do to deserve this?"

Zhu Ji stared at him with annoyance and her pert breasts are heaving considerably, showing her considerable agitation.

Unwilling to give way, Xiang Shaolong stared back at her and his mind is filled with anger.

After some time, Zhu Ji finally calmed down and lowered her head. She slowly apologised, "I am sorry to throw my temper at you but I am really angry just now."

Xiang Shaolong is feeling guilty too and embarrassedly apologised, "It is my fault for being rude too! Ai! I also do not understand why I lost control of myself."

Zhu Ji took three steps forward until they can smell each other's breaths. Lifting her pretty face, her eyes shone brightly at Xiang Shaolong and she offered, "Shaolong! Can we start all over again? You should know how I feel about you. No matter how you rebut me, I just cannot harden my heart against you."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "What about Official Lao?"

Zhu Ji trembled strongly and her complexion lost colour. Her beautiful dream fantasy has just been shattered and

replaced by cold, harsh reality.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that she is deeply involved with Lao Ai and their infatuation is even more intense than Ying Ying's relationship with Guan Zhongxie. He may feel a sense of relief but he felt a sense of helplessness at the same time.

Zhu Ji's face lost more colour before regaining her cold and proud demeanour. She nodded, "It is my fault. I heard that you are duelling Guan Zhongxie. If you happen to win, are you going to marry Lu Niangrong?"

Xiang Shaolong simply replied, "Is Lu Buwei willing to marry her favourite daughter to me?"

Zhu Ji slowly sighed again, "I am tired. Shaolong can take your leave."

Xiang Shaolong left the palace and quickly galloped back to the Wu Residence. He and the Guardians hurriedly disguised themselves as commoners and using a secret route, they mysteriously made their way to the meeting point with Tu Xian. In a short while, the two men met again in the empty house.

A pleased Tu Xian started, "Shaolong is brilliant and you managed to kill Mo Ao. Now, Lu Buwei has to depend on me for everything and I am able to have a clearer picture of his schemes."

His expression turning serious, he continued, "But Shaolong's biggest mistake is to speak to Meng Ao. This morning, Lu Buwei summoned Wang Ci, Wang Wan and Cai

Ze for a discussion. I am sure they will take some action against you soon and I am worried for you.”

Xiang Shaolong apologised first and revealed everything about Wang Ci’s meeting.

Tu Xian was blown away and took some time to finally splutter, “Lady Luck must be smiling on you. It is a gain and a loss for us. You must take safety precautions as Lu Buwei is quite determined to get rid of you. After one plan fails, he will come up with another plan shortly.”

Xiang Shaolong icily smiled, “As long as he does not send the Qin army after me, there is nothing I am afraid of. Housekeeper Tu can rest easy.”

In actual fact, Tu Xian is also confident about Xiang Shaolong’s abilities. He changed the topic, “After you put Guan Zhongxie down during the hunting fair, Lu Nianrong has been less affectionate towards him. Now, that traitor and Guan Zhongxie are afraid that she will really fall in love with you. This lass is very spoilt like Ying Ying and her female warriors. Shaolong can consider making use of her and you may even profit from this relationship.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “Guan Zhongxie can stoop to such a despicable method but how I can do the same to him?”

His expression turning solemn, Tu Xian apologised, “I am sorry! I forgot that Shaolong is a true gentleman.”

Pausing, he added, “It is a pity that Shaolong has failed to kill Tian Dan this time round. Better luck next time.”



Xiang Shaolong shook his head, "Who said so? I caught up to him in Chu and even killed him. It was quite a successful operation."

Tu Xian was astounded, "How can this be? Yesterday, traitor Lu received a letter from Tian Dan saying that he has safely returned to Qi. They had agreed that when Tian Dan attacked Yan, traitor Lu will attack Han so that Zhao and Wei will be hard-pressed to defend Yan."

Xiang Shaolong's body immediately became ice-cold. Once again, he was tricked by Tian Dan.

Tian Dan is indeed a crafty old fox. When he left Shouchun, he must have switched identities with his substitute. Together with Dan Chu, they must have headed back to Qi by travelling on the road. Even Chu was tricked by him and this is the real reason why Tian Dan chose to leave Shouchun unexpectedly.

The substitute not only resembled Tian Dan and even sounded like him. He is willing to sacrifice himself for Tian Dan and now, Xiang Shaolong has become an idiot who must reverse his name to be Long Shao Xiang.

Tu Xian noticed the change in his complexion and pressed for the details. After Xiang Shaolong has finished explaining, Tu Xian comforted, "There are bound to be some failures in life. Shaolong, you have destroyed the alliance between Qi and Chu and that alone is already a heavy blow to Tian Dan and Lu Buwei. If Li Yuan is smart, he will do his best to obstruct Tian Dan and prevent him from attacking Yan."

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to get worried about Shan Rou. There is a chance that she may try to assassinate Tian Dan again and may really end up being killed by him.

Thinking about this, his calm mind became disorderly. Now, he needs to inform Xiao Pan and the others that their mission to kill Tian Dan had failed miserably.

Tu Xian reassured him further and added, "For the past six months, Guan Zhongxie spent two hours every morning and every evening to practise his swordplay. He is ready to conclude his last battle with you. This man's willpower and determination is something that I rarely see in people nowadays. Shaolong, if you lack confidence, you can use the excuse that you do not want to marry Lu Niangrong to call off the duel. I am sure that no one will dare to speak ill of you."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed to himself. Tu Xian and Ying Ying had proposed the same idea so it is evident that Guan Zhongxie's swordsmanship must have improved tremendously. Thus, both of them are concerned that he may lose the fight and even sacrifice his life.

Although Xiang Shaolong agrees that their concerns are not unfounded, at the same time, he knows that if he shies away from this fight, in the future, he will never be able to raise his head high up again in front of Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie.

Motivated by this thought, he was filled with a strong

fighting spirit.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "No! I will win for sure!"

## CHAPTER 10

## Stargazing

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

BACK at the Command Centre, he had just finished telling Teng Yi about Tian Dan's survival. Just as Teng Yi's face changed colour, Jing Jun barged in and reported, "Lu Buwei is getting ready to attack the farms and is now deploying his men."

The two men could not be bothered about Tian Dan anymore. They asked in chorus, "How did you know?"

Jing Jun sat down and explained, "Earlier, Meng Tian came secretly to look for me and told me he overheard his father

instructing a trusted family warrior to select two thousand men from his family warriors. Together with traitor Lu's family warriors, they will form an army and attack the farms while disguised as horse thieves. None of us is to be spared. Hng! Meng Ao is such a fool. We must not spare him too."

Teng Yi's expression grew serious, "This is not called foolish, this is called cruel. If they succeeded and with Lu Buwei sheltering them, who can lay a finger on them? If the Imperial Cavalry Commander falls under their control, Xianyang City will be their playground. Luckily, we have always been fortifying our defences at the farm and have added a perimeter wall recently. They are still ignorant of our true strength so we still have a fighting chance."

Xiang Shaolong reminded, "Meng Ao is well-versed in warfare and he must have capable men under his command. Coupled with the thousands of warriors in Lu Residence, they will have double our strength if they attacked with just seven thousand men. If not for Meng Tian's information, we will suffer a huge loss when they attack. Of course it is a different matter now."

Teng Yi's face lost colour, "Not good. This morning, Pu Bu and Liu Chao have led two thousand men towards the Northern Border. We have lesser manpower and it does not bode well for us."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, "What? They left already?"

Teng Yi sighed, "This is Grandmaster Wu's idea as Eldest Brother needs these men urgently. Thus, they made quick

preparations and left as early as possible.”

Jing Jun suggested, “Why don’t we get a few men from the Cavalry Army to help us?”

Xiang Shaolong concluded, “We must never do that. If we have any deployments, that traitor Lu will soon get wind of it. Moreover, our Wu Family Elite Army must not be mixed with outsiders as this will affect our efficiency. We may also put Meng Tian in danger.”

Jing Jun nodded, “I nearly forgot to say something. Meng Tian suggested that we run for our lives as he did not expect us to have the ability to face his Dad’s army.”

Filled with a heroic air, Teng Yi state in a deep voice, “I will return to the farm immediately to prepare for battle and disperse all our young and womenfolk. Third Brother and Little Jun can return tomorrow and do not cause any unnecessary alarm. You should not fetch Widow Qin to the farm if possible. The crux of this battle is the element of surprise. We must trick the enemy to continue thinking that we are unprepared for them.”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and nodded, “I understand. This time round, we will make Lu Buwei, Meng Ao and Guan Zhongxie take a big tumble.”

Arriving home, Xiang Shaolong told his wives about Tian Dan being alive, Lu Buwei using Wang Ci to ambush him and the imminent attack on the farms. Everyone including Ji Yanran was shaken at this news.

Zhao Zhi's revenge dream has been shattered. In addition, worrying about Shan Rou's safety has caused her to lose her appetite and she hid in her room crying.

Xiang Shaolong did his best to comfort her and returned back to discuss further with Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang.

Ji Yanran sighed, "Tian Dan's substitute is really remarkable and he imitated his body language and gestures exceedingly well. Even we were tricked!"

Wu Tingfang bitterly smiled, "If the impersonation is lousy, the fake Tian Dan would not be able to deceive so many of us at the hunting fair."

Xiang Shaolong can feel the hatred swelling up in him. He was thoroughly deceived by this sly old fox. But Tian Dan's substitution trick is meant for the people of Chu and not him but he was deceived as well. It seems like fate cannot be changed.

Ji Yanran forced herself to brighten up, "Luckily, Uncle Qing has built many new weapons that Xiang Shaolong has invented. We can use this opportunity to test their effectiveness."

Xiang Shaolong recalled his improved weapons and armour and can feel his spirits rising. He was about to speak out when Zhou Wei came in hugging a roll of drawings. Despite her tired look, her eyes are shining with excitement.

Ji Yanran gladly mentioned, "After Little Wei received your instructions, she has been working day and night designing

the fake Black Dragon. It seems like she finally has a breakthrough!”

Zhou Wei humbly greeted, “It is all thanks to Madam’s guidance.”

Xiang Shaolong received the drawings and spread them open. It was a construction plan with many creative designs.

Zhou Wei sat down and began explaining, “This Black Dragon is divided into eighteen sections and one man will operate each section. Just by using their hands, they can form a black dragon which can float and sink as needed. When the dragon is built, the men needed some practice to make sure that everything runs smoothly.”

She added, “There is an air bag along the spine of the dragon. When it is filled with air, the dragon can float or sink as needed. To escape underwater undetected, all you need to do is to burst the air bag after the performance.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and he went through the plans with Ji Yanran and Zhou Wei for another two hours. They thought hard at all the possibilities and made all the improvements before retiring back to bed.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Shan led the Wu Family Elite Warriors who are in the Cavalry Army as well as Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Xiang Bao’er and the Tian sisters back to the farms.

The Imperial Cavalry Army was left in Wu Guo’s charge.

Xiang Shaolong set off earlier and went to fetch Qin Qing



with the Eighteen Guardians.

Qin Qing is waiting for him in her residence. When he arrived, she set off immediately and joined his entourage.

This ancient beauty is delicately dressed with a snow white cloak and a thin veil that blocks out the strong wind. Her overpowering charm has Jing Shan and the Guardians totally spellbound.

Riding beside her, Xiang Shaolong forgot all about Lu Buwei's threat and laughed, "Grand Tutor Qin is especially pretty today!"

Qin Qing nonchalantly replied, "Go ahead and tease me all you like."

Xiang Shaolong loosened up, "Grand Tutor Qin has a veil on. Are you afraid that we will see your red and embarrassed face?"

Qin Qing has led a chaste life and has never been teased like this. She loudly wailed, "You better behave yourself or I will not speak to you during the journey."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and hurriedly swallowed the rest of his words.

Qin Qing charmingly giggled, "So Xiang Shaolong is not as brave as I thought. What did the Empress want with you yesterday?"

Xiang Shaolong was astounded, "It seems like nothing escapes your detection within the palace."

Qin Qing plainly replied, "The Empress is considered to have spent little time within the palace. Her attendants are mainly made up of Lady Hua Yang's ex attendants so if you dare to do anything deceitful, you cannot escape my knowledge. So far, you have been quite honourable."

Xiang Shaolong was amused, "Grand Tutor Qin, please forgive me for being rude but I believe it is you who is being deceitful. You have already fallen in love with me but still refused to admit it. Ha!"

Appearing unmoved, Qin Qing mused, "All men loved to brag and Grand Tutor Xiang is of no exception. On this trip, I am just accompanying Yanran, Tingfang and Zhi Zhi. Official Xiang must be mistaken to sprout such nonsense. Based on this fact, I will not hold it against you but you better watch yourself."

Xiang Shaolong sighed, "It seems like I have to resort to force instead."

Qin Qing shrieked, "You dare!"

The city gates appearing in their view, Xiang Shaolong squeezed Jifeng with his legs and he sped forward, laughing loudly, "I now understand that dating Grand Tutor Qin is so exciting. Thanks for your sharing."

Out of the city, they met up with Ji Yanran and the rest and continued riding. At night, they finally stopped at a high slope and began building tents and cooking meals, enjoying the wonders of Mother Nature.

The weather is great and the sky is filled with countless stars. The land is covered with shimmering snow and it was a mysterious and breathtaking sight.

Qin Qing appears to be in a great mood and is having a private conversation with Ji Yanran. Once in a while, they will give Xiang Shaolong a mesmerizing look and fill his heart with warmth against the bitter cold.

After dinner, the two mothers Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi went to coax Xiang Bao'er to sleep while Tian Zhen and Tian Feng helped to wash up.

With Ji Yanran and Qin Qing in tow, Xiang Shaolong went to a slope and laid some blankets on the ground. Sitting down, they looked up to the sky and were lost in the mystifying exquisiteness of the universe.

Xiang Shaolong laid down with Ji Yanran on his left and Qin Qing on his right. Enjoying their fragrances, he was completely inebriated and wished that time can stand still in this moment forever.

After a while, Ji Yanran bypassed Xiang Shaolong and started chatting with Qin Qing. Like the most melodious music, their voices entered his ears.

Funnily, he did not pick up their dialogue and is unwilling to. He is at ease and takes pleasure in hearing their voices just like he is listening to the best musical orchestra.

The bright moon slowly rose above the tree branches and gently shone down on them.

Sounds of the warhorses or humans can be heard occasionally from the top of the slope.

It is absolutely tranquil and peaceful.

Xiang Shaolong let out a comfortable sigh.

Ji Yanran loving looked down at him and softly asked, “A penny for your thoughts?”

Xiang Shaolong stretched out his four limbs and accidentally brushed past Qin Qing’s jade legs. He hurriedly shrunk back but Qin Qing had already trembled slightly and whined sensitively in protest.

Pretending not to hear anything, Ji Yanran wailed, “I am talking to you!”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart nearly melted. He stretched out his hand and gently held onto Ji Yanran’s hand and yearned, “I was thinking that the three of us can sleep here tonight and enjoy this limitless view. We can count the stars and fall asleep counting them. We may even dream of stars in our sleep.”

Qin Qing was thrilled, “How can the sky be unlimited?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “If there is a limit, then there must be a border. But there must be something beyond the border right?”

Her eyes shining with joy, Ji Yanran stared up to the sky and softly remarked, “Hubby’s words are too deep and even I cannot fathom them. Godfather mentioned before, every

human is a star that dropped down from heaven. When we die, we will return back to the sky. Isn't that sweet?"

Xiang Shaolong stared at Qin Qing.

The beauty is staring at the sky and her flawless looks seemed to be part of the attractive sky. Under the moonlight, her face is glowing like a piece of top quality silk. His heart aroused, Xiang Shaolong could not help but stretched his other hand over and held her hand tightly too.

Qin Qing's body trembled again and she shot him a look. Trying to wrest her hand back, she gave up after two tries and her face began to burn with passion.

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong felt like he owns the entire beautiful star studded sky.

Everything is materializing like a dream.

He remembered the times when he first came to this ancient era and was subjected to numerous sufferings and was bullied by Zhao Mu and other villains. It is all thanks to his strong will and fighting spirit that he managed to cultivate Qin Shi Huang and even won the hearts of these beautiful women. What more can he ask for?

To the people who knew him in the 21st century, he had died a long time ago. Who can guess that he is living a different life two thousand years ago during the warring states period?

Is this a kind of reincarnation? When he really dies, will he be reborn again two thousand years later to travel back

again in time to this ancient era? It is all due to the time machine which somehow manages to preserve his age and memory!

Ji Yanran chirped, "Why are the two of you so quiet?"

Qin Qing struggled again and realised that she cannot overcome Xiang Shaolong's iron grip. She whispered, "I don't know why but I feel so lazy I do not want to say anything."

Xiang Shaolong could not help but utter, "This is called, Speaking to your loved one at night, silence can be better than words!"

Both women shook at the same time and lowered their heads to look at him.

Ji Yanran sighed, "These two lines are so poetic and appropriate for this present circumstance. There is no line that is more befitting."

Qin Qing seems to be moved and held his hand harder instead. She softly pleaded, "Can you say a few more lines for me?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that his literacy is limited and most of his lines are the limited knowledge he gained from his high school Mandarin lessons. He bitterly smiled, "I must have an Inspired Moment and I cannot intentionally create lines whenever I wanted."

Qin Qing was touched, "Inspired Moment. These four words are already so poetic. Ai! Xiang Shaolong, why is your brain so different from others?"

Ji Yanran laughed, "If Xiang Shaolong is a normal man, Sister Qin will not sit beside him and allowed him to accompany you to sleep while admiring the stars. And you will not blame him for being rude to you."

Her face turning red immediately, Qin Qing protested, "Sister Yanran, you... When did I agree to accompany him...? I am going to keep quiet."

Ji Yanran coaxed, "Hubby, do say a few more beautiful lines for Sister Qin. I also wanted to see her moving expression."

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say 'When the golden wind meets the jade outdoors, it is better than countless moments in man's world' which is what Zhao Ya repeated non-stop before her death. He felt like his heart was being sliced apart by a knife and could not say anything momentarily.

Qin Qing was looking intimately at him and was surprised, "Is Grand Tutor Xiang feeling unwell?"

Xiang Shaolong sat up and took a few deep breaths, suppressing the grief he had over Zhao Ya's death. He shook his head, "It's nothing."

Ji Yanran leaned onto him and gently comforted, "Except for Sister Qin and me, you are not allowed to think of anything else."

Xiang Shaolong emptied his brain of all thoughts and stared at the faraway mountains that were enveloped in moonshine. Like a lost child, he kept nodding his head.

Qin Qing mused, "It would be great if Yanran has her jade

flute now.”

Ji Yanran smiled, “Now, I only wanted to hear hubby say a few touching sentences. Doesn’t Sister Qin?”

Qin Qing loudly complained, “Xiang Shaolong bullying me is bad enough. Now I have to deal with this terrible Talented Lady Ji too.”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and had an inspiration. He chanted, “Is there a pub that cannot make you drunk? Is there a lady who does not pine for her loved one? What great ability do I have to gain the affections of the two best women on earth and make this bold statement?”

Both women were moved and like two opposing poles of a magnet, their gazes were fixated on his face.

Abruptly, Jing Jun’s voice rang out behind them, “I found them!” Following him were Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi who are looking for their hubby, scaring Qin Qing who frantically yank her hand back.

That night, Xiang Shaolong, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng shared a tent, only hugging each other to sleep. Times are precarious and it is inadvisable to indulge in pleasures of the flesh.

Before the sky has yet to brighten, Xiang Shaolong is already fully awake while the Tian sisters are still sound asleep like two cute kittens.

Xiang Shaolong carefully slipped out of the warm blankets and put his cloak on. Feeling his way out of the dark tent, he



approached Qin Qing's tent.

Within the pitch black tent, Qin Qing's light breathing can be heard.

But Xiang Shaolong suddenly sensed that something is not right; there are a dagger pointing at his own waist and Ji Yanran's threatening voice can be heard in the darkness, "Who is it?"

Qin Qing's light breathing stopped and she was jolted awake.

Xiang Shaolong was totally humiliated. He whispered, "It is me!"

Ji Yanran chortled and kept her dagger. Leaning into his bosom, she giggled, "I am so sorry and my mistake is unpardonable. I actually spoiled hubby's grand plan to raid our tent and make love to us."

Qin Qing may be keeping quiet but Xiang Shaolong wished he could dig a hole and bury his head inside forever.

The sky has just brightened and everyone is occupied with packing their tents.

Qin Qing stayed as far apart from Xiang Shaolong as possible during the journey. Xiang Shaolong is feeling guilty too and he rode ahead with Jing Jun and the rest in the front.

Shortly after noon, they finally arrived at the farms.

There are sentries based on every piece of high ground cum strategic locations and security is extremely tight.

Teng Yi is busy instructing the Wu Family Elite Army to plan

obstacles and lay traps near the entrances and exits. Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun went to assist him while Ji Yanran and the other girls returned back to the farm residences.

Teng Yi led the two men on an inspection tour of the farm layout and defences. As he rode his horse alongside them, he explained, "Our farms is enormous and it is impossible to guard against every battle line. Therefore, I have focused our strength at the courtyard. Because there is nothing specific to guard, I have increase the height and thickness of the perimeter wall and erected more signal towers. I have also laid many traps around the walls and herded most of the animals away. I have left about a hundred animals behind as a decoy."

By now, they have ridden up a small hill that is overlooking the wide farmlands.

The Hidden Dragon Abode is one of the buildings in the main courtyard. Initially, there were only eighteen buildings but now, there are over sixty buildings. With high walls surrounding each building, it is like a mini city. If the two thousand men were used to defend the two mile perimeter, it will be largely insufficient. Moreover, the enemy would have come prepared; if they focused on one or two main areas to attack, they can overcome the defenders easily.

Xiang Shaolong shared all his observations and finally suggested, "This time, we must use some of the battle strategies from the Mohist Scroll and 'Attack The Attackers'. If we can lay an ambush outside the perimeter wall and

coordinate our attacks, we will give them the fight of their life.”

Teng Yi frowned, “I thought about this possibility too. The problem is that Meng Ao is attacking us personally and this man is well-versed in warfare. He would not use up all his men in a full attack but will probably base his forces on higher ground and attack us in different waves. Our ambush army will become an isolated army instead and this is disadvantageous for us.”

Xiang Shaolong confidently decided, “In that case, it is the higher ground that we must establish control first.” Pointing to a dense snow forest near a mountain base, he recommended, “If we can build an underground tunnel that goes to that forest from here, we can distract the enemies’ attacking force.”

Jing Jun interrupted, “Without a month or two, it is impossible to build a tunnel like that.”

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for his mistake and changed the topic, “In that case, we can build a hidden shelter instead.”

Teng Yi bitterly laughed, “If the shelter can only hide a dozen men or so, it would be fruitless. Moreover, Meng Ao should see through this trick given his battle experience.”

Xiang Shaolong thought even harder and happened to see some smoke rising from the farm chimneys. He had a brainwave and exclaimed, “I got it!”

Both men stared at him in shock.

Looking at the smoke, Xiang Shaolong proudly explained, "We can dig a few holes along the valleys and fill them with oil, firewood and other burning materials. It would be better if there is a bad smell created from the burning. When it is lighted, large amounts of smoke can be produced and some of the smoke will be blown uphill towards the higher ground. When the enemy is thrown into confusion, we shall attack them at the perfect time and I guarantee that their forces will be in total disarray and easily destroyed as a result."

Jing Jun and Teng Yi were inspired by his strategy.

Laughing to himself that this is probably the first form of chemical warfare in history, Xiang Shaolong continued, "The enemies will naturally attack at night. As long as we are careful, we can escape after lighting up the smoke pits. We will also have a wet cloth to cover our faces and avoid breathing in any of the smoke."

Jing Jun excitedly cried, "I know of some trees nearby called Poison Oak. When the wood is being burnt, it produces an extremely foul smell. Let me go and cut some now!" Finishing his words, he rode away at once.

Teng Yi was astonished, "Third Brother is truly creative and wise. In fact, we can set up several of these smoke pits and light up those which are having a favourable wind direction. I shall get some men to prepare these pits now. You should go back and have some rest!"

At dinner time, Teng Yi is still busy with work.

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Tingfang went to the main hall to dine with Wu Yingyuan and his wife while Qin Qing accompanied Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi for dinner in the Hidden Dragon Abode.

When Xiang Shaolong came back, Ji Yanran and Qin Qing are performing a duet with their flute and qin. His musical knowledge is quite shallow but he still enjoyed their playing.

Out of the blue, Ji Yanran suggested that Xiang Shaolong go for a stroll with Qin Qing. Unexpectedly, Qin Qing agreed to her idea too.

Xiang Shaolong is beyond delight and realised that Qin Qing did not really hold it against him for his earlier intrusion and hurriedly accompanied his love out of the Abode.

## CHAPTER 11

## The Great Farm Battle

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE FARMS were lighted in many areas and it was as bright as day. The two thousand Elite Wu Family Warriors and several thousand farmhands are busy constructing defence structures, giving top priority to the smoke pits.

It was strangely calm and peaceful within the residences as if no one expects an imminent battle.

Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing are strolling along a gravel path that is linking the several farm buildings. Coming to a well, Xiang Shaolong fetched a pail of water and took two sips. His

arteries nearly froze on the spot.

Qin Qing sighed: "Rural living is pleasant indeed. People living in the city are more hypocritical and ruthless."

Xiang Shaolong sat down on the edge of the well and patted the empty space beside him, smiling: "Shall we take a rest?"

Qin Qing smoothly sat down beside him. Lowering her head, she softly asked: "Does Grand Tutor Xiang know why I am willing to accompany you for a private stroll?"

Feeling uncomfortable at a possible confrontation, Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath: "Speak your mind. I can accept anything."

Qin Qing sighed and shook her head: "It is not as bad as you think. I did not hold it against you at all. In actual fact, I could not conceal my feelings too and had to come to the farms with you. As you had mentioned, I have been deceiving myself all these while and suffered the pain of pining for you. But from tonight onwards, I will not be so foolish anymore."

Xiang Shaolong was unexpectedly surprised and intimately scrutinized her matchless beauty. Intoxicated, he trailed: "Grand Tutor Qin is saying that..."

Qin Qing shyly whined: "I am not saying anything. Why are these people working non-stop? Is someone going to attack the farms?"

Xiang Shaolong understands that if he tries to hasten things with Qin Qing, she would despise him. It is totally

unforeseen that she would actually lost her inhibitions and offered herself willingly, adding to the excitement of the relationship. Telling himself to be patient, he divulged Lu Buwei's scheme and concluded: "Will Grand Tutor Qin blame me for putting you in danger?"

Qin Qing decisively shook her head: "Of course not! I am delighted because you have finally regarded me as... Ah, it is nothing."

Xiang Shaolong could not help but face the sky and laughed: "Is Grand Tutor Qin trying to say that I have finally regarded you as my woman?"

Qin Qing loudly wailed: "No such thing. Hai! It is your brain and you can think whatever you want."

Xiang Shaolong reached his hand over and held tightly onto her hand. Standing up, he invited: "Let me introduce you to our battle formation. Otherwise, you may blame me for hiding things from you again."

Qin Qing struggled shortly and finally accepted the fate of her hand being held by him. She shyly nodded at him first before shooting him a look at his last line, faulting him for bearing old grudges.

Xiang Shaolong's heart has completely melted and resisted the strong urge to kiss and caress her. He proceeded to lead her on a night tour of the farm.

Back at the Hidden Dragon Abode, Xiang Bao'er has been coaxed to sleep by the nanny while Wu Tingfang and Zhao



Zhi are engaged in a game of chess. The Tian sisters are watching the intense game at the side.

Ji Yanran is analyzing with Uncle Qing on how to build Zhou Wei's fake black dragon.

Witnessing Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing's return, Uncle Qing hurriedly got up and paid his respects.

Ji Yanran scanned Qin Qing's expression and smiled knowingly at Xiang Shaolong. Qin Qing maintained an innocent look throughout as if nothing has happened.

Qin Qing noticed that although they were staring at each other, she was the centre of attention and quickly left for her room.

Xiang Shaolong joined in their discussion and by the time Uncle Qing has fully grasped the essence of their needs, Xiang Shaolong took the chance to ask: "Does Uncle Qing knows how to produce firecrackers and pyrotechnics?"

Ji Yanran proudly proclaimed: "Uncle Qing's forte is in blacksmith works. If you wanted to talk about fire crackers and pyrotechnics, you can start asking me for advice!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: "You know about gunpowder and related stuff?"

Ji Yanran smugly replied: "Of course. I know about many other things too. Feel free to test my wisdom!"

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that her Talented reputation is not without merit. He was thinking of getting Uncle Qing

to manufacture a hand gun for his personal protection but decided against it in the end as a hand gun does not have the range of arrows and it is difficult to load gunpowder. He smiled: "Who am I to test you?"

Uncle Qing excused himself and Ji Yanran's expression turned serious: "Then it is my turn to test you. Go to sleep now and from tomorrow onwards, I shall take up the heavy responsibility of drilling you in spear skills. Before your duel with Guan Zhongxie, hubby must sleep alone and not indulge in pleasures of the flesh."

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. Wouldn't this shatter his beautiful dream of making love to the exquisite and alluring Qin Qing? He protested: "According to studies, love making does not affect the athletes' performance."

Ji Yanran was shocked and furrowed her brows: "What are you talking about?"

Xiang Shaolong raised both his hands in mock surrender: "I will obey all your instructions."

He left with a bitter smile.

For the next five days, Xiang Shaolong got up at cock's crow and received Ji Yanran's strict tutoring and even took the initiative to swim in the winter waters in a nearby river. In his free time, he went riding with Qin Qing and his wives and Qin Qing's favourable impression of him grew by leaps and bounds. She no longer views him as a creature of lust and they became much closer.

Teng Yi busied himself with the farm defences and morale was high among their men. Everyone is gearing up for the big showdown with their enemies.

At the sixth day, there was a heavy snowfall.

Spies reported signs of the invading army vanguard in a dense forest about five miles away.

The atmosphere became very tense immediately.

Leading his three wives and Qin Qing who are all dressed in armour, Xiang Shaolong is inspecting the surroundings from a high wall. Below him, Uncle Qing is commanding his subordinates to install heavy duty crossbow mechanisms on the city walls.

This new crossbow machines are Xiang Shaolong's latest creations. Using the same principles as machine guns, they can fire twelve arrows in succession and reach a range of over a thousand feet. This range is twice of a normal crossbow and its weakness is that it is not portable. However, as a defensive weapon, there is nothing else more ideal.

Xiang Shaolong projected his vision further away and saw that the surroundings were hazy. It is favourable for the attackers and disadvantageous for the defenders.

Ji Yanran predicted: "The enemies will definitely attack after the snowstorm and this hasty attack will be less efficient as they are lacking rest. Moreover, Meng Ao is an arrogant man and does not view us as worthy opponents. His belittling of

us will create opportunities for us to win.”

Sure enough, at dawn, spies reported sightings of the enemies from the south eastern direction. There were roughly a thousand attackers with ten odd battling rams used to ram the city walls and gates.

Everyone calmed down and prepared themselves mentally for the incoming attack.

All the warriors and workers retreated back into the city while Jing Jun led five hundred of the Wu Family Elite Warriors to a secret bunker that was built behind the high grounds.

The remaining one thousand and five hundred Wu Family Elite Warriors are camping at the trenches along the city wall. Another twenty odd farm workers made up of males, females, the old and young are situated around the residences, ready to put out any fires or repel any invaders who have successfully climbed the city wall. The fighting spirit is abundant and the atmosphere is full of battle tension.

To Qin Qing standing beside him, Xiang Shaolong asked: “Are you cold?”

Qin Qing shook her head to indicate that she is not cold and blew out a wisp of white air: “This is the first time I am participating in a battle and maybe it is due to your presence by my side; somehow, I do not have the least fear.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that her late husband died on

the battlefield and took the chance to inquire: "Does Grand Tutor Qin abhor wars?"

Qin Qing took some time to consider her answer and replied with astonishment: "This is the first time somebody asked me such a strange question. In Qin, fighting is a way for the men to showcase their ability and gain the highest honours. But after careful thinking, fighting has caused countless people to lose their countries, their homes, their parents, the spouses and their kids. War causes more hatred. What does Grand Tutor Xiang thinks?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Although I hate to admit this but fighting seems to be part of human nature. Whether it is fighting between two countries or two persons, fighting arises from competition as it is human nature to compare and compete. It becomes a case of survival of the fittest but it is actually human greed for more territory or more possessions. Every person is striving to gain more fame, power and wealth by putting down other people. Thinking about this, I could not help but shudder."

Wu Tingfang moved closer to him and leaned into his arms in daze. She admiringly praised: "Hubby's words are so true."

Ji Yanran nodded: "This is the reason why Godfather and I have been praying for the New Saint. Only when the world is united can we enjoy genuine peace and harmony."

Xiang Shaolong silently stared at the glowing snowflakes that were illuminated by the light of the fire. He recalled something and smiled: "My dear wives, do you all know that

I loved Grand Tutor Qin addressing me as Grand Tutor Xiang. If she addresses me as Commander Xiang or Official Xiang, then I know that I am in trouble.”

Qin Qing loudly wailed: “You, why are you always bringing up the past.”

Zhao Zhi poked Qin Qing’s shoulder and teased: “When is Sister Qin going to address him as hubby just like us... hee... you know what I mean!”

Qin Qing was greatly embarrassed but could not bear to blame her. Her face is as red as an apple and she was speechless. Before she could react, the enemies have been sighted.

As Teng Yi had anticipated, the enemies assembled themselves on the high slopes before moving their battling rams and cloud ladders twenty feet away from the perimeter wall, getting ready to attack the farms.

Xiang Shaolong and his wives put on an act of unpreparedness and their men pretended to be flustered and were running around in panic.

Their act of confusion is to draw the enemies nearer.

Ji Yanran smiled: “In defending a city, first, everyone must be united and face death without fear. Next, men must be properly allocated according to their capabilities and teams. Thirdly, you must have sufficient defensive structures and fourth, there must be no lack of food and resources. Our perimeter wall may not withstand the attacks but we have

laid many traps around the area which will cover up this weakness. We have also fulfilled the four conditions so I am certain of victory.”

Teng Yi came up to them and added: “Yanran is well versed in city defences; we will also need to look at attacks!”

Ji Yanran smiled: “We will have to depend on Little Jun then.”

The rumbling sounds of the battle drums filled the air as the attackers started to move the rams nearer. Disguised as horse thieves, they attacked from four routes.

Teng Yi laughed: “Meng Ao is trying to trick us by making a frontal attack and taking away our attention. The real attacking force should be coming from the back. Let’s play along with him.”

Before he finished speaking, a loud crash was heard. One of the battling rams has fallen into a trap along with several men and horses and it was a sorry sight.

The traps were all within range of the crossbow machines. Teng Yi shouted an order and the arrows fell like rain. The enemy vanguard of one thousand men were shot down mercilessly as another battling ram fell into another trap that was filled with sharp knives.

The battle drums sounded again and it was followed by war cries from the left and the back. The war has finally begun.

Stones from catapults and flying balls of fire were crisscrossing in the air.

Due to the long range of the crossbow machines and their higher position, every single enemy soldier was killed before they can even come near to the perimeter wall.

For two whole hours, only two battling rams managed to reach the base of the perimeter wall but were smashed to smithereens by the catapulted rocks.

Occasionally, some fire arrows were shot into the city but were swiftly extinguished.

Everyone knew that if the wall is breached, it will be a serious disadvantage so everyone is doing their utmost best to fight. The blood of the enemy soldiers is flowing like a river and the plains were scattered with corpses.

By now, the enemies have laid wooden planks over the traps and are using giant shields to protect their bodies. Advancing with the remaining five battling rams, they advanced rapidly.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the time is ripe and gave his order. The trumpets sounded his order over the entire compound.

About ten of the smoke pits started to emit thick smoke. With the wind carrying them, they were blown in the direction of the attackers outside the city and also those who are based on the high slopes. The enemies begin to break down and cough incessantly.

Teng Yi roused the Elite Army and motivated them to fight even harder.

Xiang Shaolong separately kissed the cheeks of Wu Tingfang



and Zhao Zhi, instructing them to stay within the city. He then came to Qin Qing.

Qin Qing's face is totally red and she turned her face to one side, awaiting a kiss from him.

Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong used his hand to prop her chin and lifted her face, kissing her heavily on the lips. With a broad smile, he left with Teng Yi and Ji Yanran.

As the thick smoke is subsiding, loud shouts of killing and arrows firing can be heard from the high slope. Apparently, Jing Jun and his men are now attacking the enemies with arrows.

At the main door, one thousand Elite Wu Family Warriors are already mounted on their horses and waiting patiently for Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Ji Yanran. When the three of them mounted their horses, thunderous drumming filled the air and their army marched out neatly before erupting into ruthless slaughtering of their foe. Using the safe paths that were not booby-trapped, they cut into the enemies' formation like a sharp cleaver.

With the Flying Dragon spear and shield, Xiang Shaolong led the pack and killed everyone he saw. The enemy soldiers who have lost their fighting will due to the smoke are barely able to resist his overpowering attacks.

The Elite Warriors displayed their fearsome attacking power. Everyone was fighting their best and like a tiger among a herd of sheep, the enemy formation was broken and they continued their killing spree up the high slope.

By this time, the enemies on the slope are in complete disarray thanks to the choking smoke and Jing Jun's attacks. Coupled with this new attacking force upon them, the attackers could not take it anymore. Demoralised, everyone is only trying their best to escape in all directions.

The city gates opened again and it was another army of three hundred Elite Warriors led by Wu Yan Zhu. Timing their attacks, they killed numerous enemies on the lower ground. In a pathetic state, all the invaders are now only concerned about escaping and staying alive.

Xiang Shaolong met up with Jing Jun's forces and they continued chasing and killing more enemies for another twenty miles before returning back to the farm.

It was a complete rout. Over two thousand enemies were killed and more than two hundred were imprisoned. On their side, there were only thirty one dead and less than two hundred injured. It was a significant win but Xiang Shaolong could not find any joy. For a peace loving man like him, wars, death and injuries are not something he can derive any joy from.

When the sky has brightened, the Wu Family Warriors came out to survey the damage and clean up the area. Jing Jun is put in charge of sending the prisoners of war back to Xianyang City and create some trouble for Lu Buwei.

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong surveyed the aftermath and lamented: "Too bad we did not capture Meng Ao or Guan Zhongxie. Otherwise, Lu Buwei will surely be implicated."

Xiang Shaolong knew better than anyone that before Xiao Pan's coronation, Lu Buwei cannot be toppled. He let out a long sigh and did not reply.

Teng Yi added: "Those captured are either Meng Ao or Lu Buwei's family warriors. Let's see how he explains himself."

Xiang Shaolong replied in a deep voice: "Don't underestimate him. I am sure he has a ready solution. This matter will only come to a rest."

Two days later, they received their answer.

Jing Jun sent someone to report that when they arrived at Xianyang City, they were detained by Guan Zhongxie at the City gates. Lu Buwei came personally and took over the prisoners, promising to punish them severely and find out the true mastermind. Based on Lu Buwei's strong influence, it is hard for Xiao Pan to interfere and the end result is meaningless.

Earlier, Jing Jun has been reminded by Xiang Shaolong and submitted Talented Lady Ji's report to Wang He who in turn, submitted it to Left Premier Lord Changping. Lord Changping then reported the whole incident to Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan during the morning court.

The report was powerful in the sense that it did not pinpoint Lu Buwei as the main perpetrator but hinted at his involvement every now and then.

No matter how daring Lu Buwei is, he will not dare to invade the farms in near future.

Xiang Shaolong is working especially hard today at his spear techniques because Qin Qing woke up early specially to see him practice.

Pi! Pi! Pak! Pak! For the first time, he forced Ji Yanran to fight with all her might to match his attacks.

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has caused his beloved Talented Lady Ji to fight her best and broke out into laughter. Retrieving his spear, he stood upright in an imposing manner just like a heavenly general.

Wu Tingfang, Qin Qing and the other girls are clapping so hard their palms hurt. Ji Yanran was pleased: "Hubby is really formidable. In a few days, you have understood the essence of spear techniques. I submit to you."

Teng Yi came up to them and was holding a long sabre that Uncle Qing has just forged. He laughed loudly: "Second Brother is here to test your spear skills using this new sabre Uncle Qing has forged for you. Shaolong must be careful. The sabre has chromium alloy which is invented by you. I have tried using it to sever several spears in succession and the wear and tear is insignificant."

Ji Yanran is naturally curious and attracted to new things; moreover, it is something her own hubby created. She quickly received the long sabre from Teng Yi and scrutinized it carefully. After some time, she sighed: "This is the best weapon during a cavalry battle (fighting on horseback). I cannot understand how hubby managed to think of such a creative weapon. On the battlefield and charging at the

enemy with a sword, one has to utilise the arm strength to hit the enemy as the horse speed is too fast. You cannot just pierce your sword forward. In this case, a sword is not very effective although both sides of the sword are sharp. Additionally, the sword is a narrow weapon and only the sword centre is thick enough to be effective. With this sabre, it is easy to cut down at the enemy as it is sharp on one side and thick on the back. It is a durable weapon which is good for hacking enemies and uses less strength for the same blow. Oh. I must also get Uncle Qing to forge another sabre for me to play.”

Xiang Shaolong was speechless at her observations.

He wanted a sabre from Uncle Qing as he had always admired the samurai katana of the Japanese. He did not expect the weapon to be so formidable.

Wu Tingfang received the sword from Ji Yanran and admired it. After taking a closer look, she exclaimed: “This sabre has very nice engravings on it. Ah, it even has a name inscribed here: Hundred Battles. Hundred Battles, Hundred Victories. It is a lucky name. Ah! This sabre is so heavy!”

Teng Yi explained: “Uncle Qing’s forging method is Yue’s secret ‘Hundred Forges’ method. The weapon is forged over many rounds and subjected to intense fire. It is definitely much superior to a common sabre.”

To Ji Yanran, he smiled: “If Yanran wants another sabre like this, you have to wait for a year but the sabre may not be as good as this Hundred Battle Sabre. This is Uncle Qing’s

masterpiece. He has failed countless times before he was finally enlightened to forge this heavenly weapon. All right, Shaolong come!”

Everyone was excited and hurriedly retreated.

Among the falling snowflakes, Teng Yi raised the sabre and stood in an impressive pose.

Xiang Shaolong let out a roar and the Flying Dragon spear sprang into life into mid air and agilely advanced towards Teng Yi’s chest area.

Teng Yi understands that Xiang Shaolong is afraid to injure him because of his longer weapon and chided: “Are you lacking confidence in me? Show me your best moves!”

Wu Tingfang was affected by Teng Yi’s air of righteousness and loudly cheered for Xiang Shaolong. Even Qin Qing is cheering loudly for him, showing that she has adapted to Xiang Shaolong’s household and lifestyle.

Xiang Shaolong laughed and adopted the horse stance, his long spear striking towards Teng Yi’s belly like lightning.

Only with such a long weapon can he attack from such an angle as it is hard for the sabre to deflect the long spear.

Teng Yi coldly snorted and slashed down with the Hundred Battle Sabre.

Xiang Shaolong changed from a piercing attack to a hooking attack. Dang! He failed to hook the Hundred Battle Sabre. He quickly retrieved the spear to protect himself. In the midst of

his movement, Teng Yi dashed forward to attack him and Xiang Shaolong blocked with his spear. In a short span of time, they have exchanged many blows.

The first time the sabre and spear come into contact, the spear was heavily deflected. If the Flying Dragon Spear is not made of the best steel but ordinary wood, it would be broken into many pieces by now.

By now, the Eighteen Guardians and Shan Lan have heard the commotion and are busy cheering for them and it was a lively scene.

After another heavy blow, both men retreated and showed signs of tiredness.

Ji Yanran clapped loudly: "This is a match with no clear winner. As long as Second Brother practices more with the sabre and gain more experience, the loser will be our undefeated Xiang Shaolong for sure."

Xiang Shaolong looked up to the sky and had a long laugh. Throwing his spear away, he cheered: "I think I am not using the spear anymore. Next month, I will use the Hundred Battle Sabre to take Guan Zhongxie's life."

Teng Yi joyfully passed him the sabre and wished: "I wish Shaolong will fight and win a hundred battles and be invincible under the skies."

Xiang Shaolong received the treasure sabre and tested its weight, praising: "This sabre is nearly as heavy as my Mozi Sword but it looks much lighter from its appearance. This

will catch Guan Zhongxie by surprise and make him regret for duelling with me.”

Teng Yi laughed: “From today onwards, your Mozi Sword is mine. After using the Hundred Battle Sabre, all other weapons other than the Mozi Sword is uninteresting.”

Both men exchanged a look and laughed loudly. On the side, Ji Yanran just received a report from Wu Guang and happily chirped: “Wu Guang just reported that a giant hot spring has been discovered at Moon Prayer Cliff. Let’s go there immediately.”

Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng cheered in unison.

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Are we skipping practice today?”

Smiling sweetly and charmingly, Ji Yanran gently coaxed: “With this indomitable Hundred Battle Sabre, what’s wrong with taking a day off?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his confidence rising. At the end of the day, he managed to survive until today is because of his knowledge that spans across two thousand years. This sabre he is holding in his hand is the best proof.



## CHAPTER 12

## Love Wish Granted

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AMONG the rising heat, the entire rock pool is bathing in warmth. Coupled with the snowflakes falling from the sky, it is heaven on earth.

The boiling spring water sprang out from three cervices in the rock wall and flowed straight into the pool. Any excess water continued to flow to another rock pool five feet below, forming another soaking area. Jing Shan and the other Guardians are congregating in that pool.

On Moon Prayer Cliff, at this inaccessible location, all earthly

rules no longer matter. Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen, Tian Feng all revealed the glory of the beautiful bodies and were soaking contentedly in the hot spring. None of them are willing to leave, for in this ancient era where hot water showers are unavailable; there is no better treat for their bodies in the middle of winter.

Qin Qing removed her shoes and soaked her delicate feet into the spring water. To her, that is as far as she would go.

Xiang Shaolong and the girls stared at her with embarrassment. Sitting down beside her and soaking his feet too, he offered: "Does Grand Tutor Qin wants to soak the spring water too? I can join the boys down there."

Qin Qing resisted the temptation of the spring water and shyly shook her head: "Grand Tutor Xiang can go ahead and enjoy himself. I am very happy where I am."

Xiang Shaolong noticed that her face is slightly reddish, making her even more mesmerizing. He teased: "Are you not afraid to see me naked?"

Qin Qing knows that this man is intentionally teasing her and she wailed: "Get into the pool quickly. I will not be bothered with you anymore today. I have yet to settle the last score with you!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that she is referring to the incident where he kissed her on the lips. Without any concern for her feelings, he leaned over to kiss her face and embraced her in a bear hug. Just as Qin Qing is about to struggle, both of them slipped and fell right into the hot spring.

Ji Yanran and the other girls swam over, cheering, giggling and teasing them. Among the falling snowflakes, there are no more barriers between them.

After dinner, while Qin Qing and the other girls are playing with Xiang Bao'er, Ji Yanran dragged Xiang Shaolong to a small pavilion in the garden to do snow-watching. She cooed: "I have never seen Sister Qin so happy before. Are you ready to marry her officially?"

Xiang Shaolong thought for a minute and replied: "I think we should discuss this after my duel with Guan Zhongxie!"

Ji Yanran suggested: "I have thought about it already. The best time is after the appearance of the Black Dragon. That is the best time for changes, including a change in Sister Qin's status. It will not arouse the displeasure of the royal family."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "Yanran is thoughtful indeed. With Sister Qin, I have no other wants."

Ji Yanran seriously state: "To get Sister Qin to marry you is not easy. You better treat her like a respectable lady. Ai. I am talking about making love. Sister Qin hates the custom of Qin girls having pre marital sex. Hubby should understand what I mean!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Now, I dare not even touch you; why would I even dare to think about doing anything to her?"

Ji Yanran giggled: "It is fine to make love once or twice before the duel as long as you curb your desires."

Xiang Shaolong was delighted and held Ji Yanran's hands, sighing: "You must have understood my agony to grant me this special pardon."

Ji Yanran gently replied: "It must be the hot spring's effects. But the one sharing your bed tonight should not be me. Since I am the one who set this rule, I should be the last one to make love with you."

Among the giant snowflakes, Xiang Shaolong held tightly to the Hundred Battle Sabre and is standing alone in the middle of the snowy plains. Behind him are the Wu Family farms.

It may be due to the wonderful feeling of this new weapon that the sabre has never left his side for the past ten days. He is trying to inculcate the three Ultimate Stances of Mozi into the sabre play. After a round of meditation, his heart is still as choppy as the sea. He seems to be on the verge of having a breakthrough on the sabre skill but something seems to be lacking.

During his meditation, he had memory flashes of his past. When he recalled the scenes of the tragic deaths of Zhao Qian and the maids, hot blood surged up in his body and he could not suppress it anymore.

Brandishing his sabre, he sliced ferociously through the air at an invisible opponent.

The sabre rang out loudly as it cuts through empty air.

He suddenly felt at ease and naturally exhibited the Mozi Swordplay but this time, he focused on slashing and

chopping moves. Somehow, there is still something missing. Out of a sudden, he had a brainwave and finally understood the crux of the problem.

He remembered that the Mozi Swordplay focuses on defence rather than attack but the nature of the Hundred Battle Sabre is to attack and not to defend. Therefore, when he tried to inculcate the Mozi Swordplay into the sabre play, it doesn't feel right.

Thinking about this, he quickly forgot about the Mozi Swordplay and focused on attacks. Among the flashing of the sabre energy, he can feel his forceful attacks striking forward just like bolts of lightning, giving him a strong dose of endorphin.

The tremendous impact of the sabre flashes can be felt all around him.

Like a solid mountain, Xiang Shaolong stood erect but his mind is filled with countless giant waves.

He thought about karate and Chinese wushu which are all based on science and logic, such as attacking using the shortest distance between you and the opponent or using momentum, flow and gravity to your advantage. He even thought about ranged attacks. From all these knowledge, he tried to incorporate the essence into sabre play.

He also thought hard about samurai katana moves. Although it only has a few basic essential moves, every one of them is strong and powerful.

Thinking till here, his sword skills and sabre skills seems to merge into one.

Since Mozi can created his own swordplay and he himself has learnt the essence of his skills, why can't he create his own set of skills by taking the essence of all the martial arts he knew? Xiang Shaolong can feel the boundless of his heart and he was so touched hot tears begin to pour down his face. Facing the sky, he let out a long roar and the Hundred Battle Sabre is now flashing in a maelstrom that has seemed to envelope him.

Following the shadow of the sabre strikes, Xiang Shaolong executed a few intricate strokes and can feel the might of a million strong soldiers and war horses in his heart. He felt a sense of invincibility and fearlessness regardless of the future.

He kneeled down in an instant, knowing that he has fully grasped the intricacies of sabre play. All he lacks now is experience.

Back home, he promptly looked for Teng Yi and Ji Yanran to test out his new skills.

Holding the Flying Dragon Spear, Ji Yanran saw Xiang Shaolong posing with his sabre and was stunned: "Hubby, what happened to you? The moment you stood there exhibiting your sabre pose, I can already sense that there is no way I can even attack you successfully."

Laughingly, Xiang Shaolong bellowed: "This is called confidence and might. Come my dear, my hands are itching

already.”

Glancing at his natural heroic aura, Qin Qing and all the girls are fully intoxicated.

Letting out a shrill cry, the Flying Dragon Spear came alive in Ji Yanran’s hands. Like endless waves of strong currents, the spear dashed forward towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong brightened up. His strength, hands, eyes and footsteps are in perfect synchronicity. Using the Hundred Battle Sabre, every move is used with the appropriate strength, not too much and not too little. Instead of defending as before, he is now mainly focused on attacks. He met the attack head on, appearing to disregard the weight or length of the Flying Dragon Spear.

Under the strong pressure of the formidable sabre attacks, the Flying Dragon Spear was forced back several times. Talented Lady Ji could not retaliate at all.

Ji Yanran sensed that there is no way she can overcome him. Throwing the spear aside, she retreated and wailed: “I quit!” Turning happy in an instant, she pledged: “Xiang Shaolong, today, I, Ji Yanran, fully submit to you.”

Without any warning, Teng Yi leapt over and the Mozi Sword swung towards Xiang Shaolong with tremendous impact.

Xiang Shaolong enthusiastically let out a roar and met the attack head on.

On the surface, his counter attack looked ordinary but underneath, its angle and direction is the best possible

position available, giving everyone present a sense of grandmastery.

Even with Teng Yi's amazing arm strength and the weight of the heavy Mozi Sword, he was forced to take half a step back.

Teng Yi can feel his exhilaration rising too. When he was about to retaliate, Xiang Shaolong followed up with another two strikes. Trailing the cold sabre energy, Teng Yi felt helpless and overpowered, taking five continuous steps back in order to counter his two strikes.

Taking advantage of this window, Xiang Shaolong carried on delivering one mighty slash after another. The aura of his indomitable sabre attacks caused everyone including the girls and the Guardians to feel their hearts turning cold.

Teng Yi is a worthy opponent after all. Only after meeting another ten blows did he take another two steps back.

Xiang Shaolong retrieved his sabre and retreated but he still retained his aura of dominance.

Teng Yi laughed loudly: "If Third Brother has the intention to take my life, I am afraid I will be dead or severely maimed."

Jing Shan was flabbergasted: "What kind of sword play is that?"

Xiang Shaolong solemnly state: "It is not sword play, it is sabre play!"

Talented Lady Ji agreed: "This is Shaolong's creation:



Hundred Battle Sabre Play. It is more powerful than Mozi Swordplay. Guan Zhongxie is in trouble!"

Amidst their cheering, everyone went back to the houses.

Knock! Knock! Knock! Qin Qing's melodious voice sang out from within the room: "Who is it?"

Xiang Shaolong dryly coughed: "It is me. Can I come in?"

Qin Qing answered: "Yes, oh, no!"

Xiang Shaolong has already barged in. He was curious: "Why did Grand Tutor Qin first said Yes and then said no? Hey, what are you doing?"

Qin Qing stood up from her seat on the floor rug. Her bedroom has a stove on so it is as warm as Spring. She is dressed in an ordinary white dress with a lake green singlet. Coupled with her exquisite face, she resembled a heavenly angel.

On the floor are several pieces of protective plates. Most of them are square but there are also some rectangular and triangular pieces. There are small holes along the edges and Qin Qing is busy sewing them together. She appears to be sewing an armoured vest and the front part is already completed. There are another thirty odd pieces on the floor that has yet to be sewn.

Her petite face turning red, Qin Qing was furious: "Aren't you out for archery? Why did you come back so soon?"

Noticing the plates on the floor, Xiang Shaolong came to her

side and smiled: "Aren't these Uncle Qing's protective plates? Hey, Grand Tutor Qin must be weaving an armoured vest for me, isn't it?"

Even the root of her ears has become red. Nodding, Qin Qing tried to wriggle her way out: "I am pretty free compared to the rest. Tingfang and Zhi Zhi have to manage Bao'er and Yanran is occupied with the Black Dragon construction, so I tried to find something to do to pass the time. Ai, can you stop staring at me in such a manner?" Lowering her head, she added: "Do you realise that this is my bedroom?"

Xiang Shaolong relished: "It is fortunate that I did not treat this place like a forbidden ground, otherwise, I will not have seen Grand Tutor Qin's dedication to me. In the future, when I put on the vest, it is like... Hey! It is like Grand Tutor Qin..."

Qin Qing stomped her foot: "Can you please stop saying anymore?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart is as sweet as honey. He gently asked: "When I barged into the Qin Residence the other day, you hid the embroidery that you were sewing, I wonder..."

Qin Qing embarrassedly walked away and stopped at the window with her back to him. She lowered her head in silence, and silence means that she is indeed sewing something for him.

Xiang Shaolong can feel his pulse racing. Going to her back, he hardened his heart and grabbed her chiselled shoulders.

Qin Qing trembled for a while before calming down. Amazingly, she did not put up any struggle.

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward and pressed onto her smooth cheek and inhaled her fragrance deeply, gently reminiscing: "I can still remember the first time I saw you. It was right outside the Crown Prince's study. We were both reprimanded by you and we are like complete idiots. From then on, my respect and love for you is like an immortal."

Under his warm teasing, Qin Qing's body softened and leaned backwards into his arms. She moaned: "Your words are really unique. Complete Idiots. Like an immortal. I am only doing what is right but the two of you are clowning around, causing me to lose my temper. I nearly died of anger then."

Xiang Shaolong can feel her tender back against his own body and he was enveloped in her fragrance. His two eyes feasted on her peerless face, he thought about her virginity and was in ecstasy. His courage grew by leaps and bounds and he proposed: "Grand Tutor Qin, will you be my wife?"

Qin Qing's body shook strongly. First, her eyes shone with delight before they darkened again. She shook her head.

His hands and feet turning cold at once, Xiang Shaolong was shocked: "You do not want to marry me?"

Qin Qing had a fright too: "No, Ai, don't jump to conclusions. If I am unwilling to marry you, I will not have come to the farms with you. I am only concerned about you. For the past few years, there have been countless marriage proposals

from many members of the royal family as well as high ranking officials. They have all been rejected with the same excuse: I have no more intention to remarry. If I change my mind and marry you, it will incur much jealousy among them. Even though they are unable to prevent us from marrying, they will act unfavourably against you. You must not forget Empress Ji. She seems to have guessed our relationship!”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief and proudly proclaimed: “Let them say or do whatever they want. When have I been afraid of anyone?”

Turning her around, he hugged her tightly. The sensation of feeling her soft bouncy breasts and their legs entangled together is something that cannot be described in words.

Qin Qing opened her mouth and began panting slightly. Her eyes are half-closed, adding to her unparalleled charm.

The number one beauty of Qin forced her eyes open and declared: “Shaolong, if you really head to the borders one day, by hook or by crook, I must go with you. But please do not incur the public’s wrath because of me. Ai, since I have come all the way here, I have already regarded you as my hubby, Ah!”

Xiang Shaolong greedily kissed her and allowed her to enjoy the unreserved pleasure of intimacy of a love relationship. By the time they stopped kissing, the usually strong-willed woman has completely melted in his arms. Her arms proactively embraced his well-built neck and her body is soft

but burning with passion.

The flames of love are burning stronger than ever.

Qin Qing whispered into his ear: "Let's act normally on the surface but behind closed doors, you can do whatever you want, all right? Ah!"

How can Xiang Shaolong hold it any longer? Carrying Qin Qing up in both arms, he walked towards her bed.

By the time Xiang Shaolong woke up, it is already dark outside.

Qin Qing's voluptuous figure is still intertwined with his body.

Xiang Shaolong fondled her again and Qin Qing is awakened by his touches. Discovering Xiang Shaolong's caress, she remained submissive. Just when things are getting interesting, she suddenly sat upright and revealed the top half of her flawless body, wailing: "Oh no, it is all your fault. We have missed dinner. How am I going to face Yanran and the rest in the future?"

Xiang Shaolong cheerfully sat up and hugged her, coaxing: "It is normal for people to fall in love. Who dares to make fun of our Grand Tutor Qin? Come, let me help Grand Tutor get dressed. I am the one who undressed you so I should also be the one who dressed you"

Qin Qing may have made love to him but still cannot stand his teasing. She demanded: "Get out of my room and check out what is happening outside. Come back and report to me

as soon as possible.”

Xiang Shaolong accepted her order and jumped out of bed. He hurriedly got dressed and came back shortly. Qin Qing is sitting in front of the bronze mirror tidying up her hair. Xiang Shaolong seized her hand: “There is no need to comb any further. I love to see you with your hair and clothes in a mess. Moreover, everyone has gone to sleep. Only the Tian sisters are waiting to serve us. I have instructed them to bring dinner to us so you need not expose yourself outside.”

Right this moment, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng came in with a knowing smile. After setting up dinner, they left. Qin Qing let out a cry and fell into Xiang Shaolong’s arms, complaining: “Shaolong, you have really gotten me into trouble!”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised: “What did I do?”

Her eyes filled with numerous emotions, Qin Qing shyly replied: “Without you by my side in the future, my days will be full of sorrow!”

Xiang Shaolong helped her up and supported her up. He shook his head: “A short parting is sweeter than marriage. This is how deep our love is.”

Qin Qing was in a daze and repeated ‘a short parting is sweeter than marriage’ a few times before sighing: “No wonder even with Yanran’s talent, she still has to submit to you. Hubby’s words are the most pleasing to the ear.”

Feeling guilty, Xiang Shaolong gently asked: “Shall I feed you?”

Qin Qing nodded her head. What followed was a night of love and passion.

For the next ten odd days, Xiang Shaolong controlled his desires and spent all his time practising his sabre play, making huge progress.

On this day, he dragged the Guardians out to be his sparring partners. After he has defeated all of them soundly, Ji Yanran secretly got everyone to a location outside the farm.

At the riverside, everyone stopped their horses. She started: "Recently, a black dragon has been sighted along this river. Is hubby brave enough to kill this beast and save the people?"

Besides her, Teng Yi chortled: "If the dragon is really destroyed, Uncle Qing will strangle every one of you here."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "The Black Dragon has been completed?"

Qin Qing shouted: "Look!"

Everyone followed her line of sight and saw a strange head surfacing from below the water. With lights shining from its eyes, it was followed by several metres of the dragon body surfacing. It is a chilling scene.

However, within a minute, before the dragon can swim closer, it has already broken into two.

Ji Yanran cursed: "Those fools!"

The black dragon has now broken up into several pieces. As

the river is filled with air bubbles, the men operating the dragon frantically surfaced and swam towards shore.

Wu Tingfang and the others are laughing so hard they nearly fell down from their horses.

Holding back his own laughter, Teng Yi assured: "There is no need to fret. It is just some minor engineering issue. The weather is too cold too. They should be fine after a few more practices."

Xiang Shaolong is already very satisfied with the demonstration. After praising Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong turned his horse towards the direction of home and sighed: "These time spent back at the farms are so carefree and joyful. Thinking that I have to go back and face that smelly Premier Mentor, I don't have any appetite anymore."

Teng Yi mused: "Little Jun is the exact opposite. He is so unwilling to stay here at the farms."

Wu Tingfang laughed: "Of course. Without Lu Dan'er, what joy is there for him!"

Ji Yanran enquired: "There is another ten days till Lu Buwei's birthday. When is hubby returning?"

Xiang Shaolong thought for while and decided: "The day after tomorrow!"

Qin Qing reminded: "We must take precautions in case Lu Buwei sets an ambush for us along the way."

Xiang Shaolong commented: "The possibilities may not be



high but you are right. It is better to be safe than sorry.”

Teng Yi proudly state: “I have already made arrangements. This trip back to Xianyang City will be without hassle. I have sent men to monitor the roads so safety is not an issue.”

Zhao Zhi smiled: “This time, I must also go and watch hubby fight and kill Guan Zhongxie that basterd.”

Wu Tingfang clapped her hands in agreement.

Ji Yanran frowned: “What if Lu Buwei really decided to marry her daughter to you? What shall we do?”

Qin Qing smiled: “This is why Lu Buwei sent his men to attack the farms. He has his own fears too. Lu Buwei is also afraid that Guan Zhongxie will lose too. Thus, even if Shaolong wins, Lu Buwei will never marry his daughter to him.”

Slapping his horse forward, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Who cares what will happen? Most importantly, we must kill Guan Zhongxie first. We will solve whatever problem that comes along the way.”

With their fighting spirit at their peak, everyone slapped their horses and gave chase, leaving a long trail of horse tracks on the snow grounds. After gaining the Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong has no more fear of anyone anymore.

# VOLUME 18

## CHAPTER 1

### The Empress Moves Out Of The Palace

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

XIANG SHAOLONG has just passed the city gates when he received Xiao Pan's imperial edict to enter the palace at once.

Xiao Pan is in the inner court discussing matters with Lu Buwei, Lord Changping and other high ranking officials. After waiting in the Imperial Study for an hour, Xiang Shaolong managed to see Xiao Pan.

After they got seated, Xiao Pan smiled: "Does Master know this man named Feng Qie? He is our law minister."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile: "What is it regarding that Crown Prince specially mentioned this person?"

Xiao Pan plainly replied: "This man has some backbone and is not fearful of authority. He even dared to rebut me in court. He may be influenced by the Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu. He has been criticising our Qin laws, saying that they are too harsh and we paid too little heed to the teachings of the sages."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "In this case, Crown Prince should be upset instead. Why did you sound pleased when talking about this person?"

Xiao Pan laughed heartily: "Master knows me best. Some of his arguments do make sense. For example, he pointed out that the Kings of every state will issue new laws according to changes in society. The changes are often abrupt and take place instantly, causing confusion among the officials and the people, creating unnecessary legal issues. This is very true. We need a uniform legislative process to make our country stronger."

Gazing at this soon-to-be-eighteen future Qin Shi Huang, Xiang Shaolong is filled with respect. It is not because he has

grasped the importance of uniform law making, but that he is open to alternative views and criticism.

Xiao Pan whispered: "Initially, I thought he is Lu Buwei's man but he speaks with the same fearless aura as Master. After that, using the farm invasion report, he censured Lu Buwei strongly. As a result, I am confident that he is unafraid of death like Master. Ha! This man may not be good with administration but I am sure he will make a good Administrative Premier."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Isn't Li Si's dream going to end up in smoke? He frantically interrupted: "The Crown Prince must reconsider. I think Official Li is a better choice."

Xiao Pan shook his head: "Talking about choices, I think Master is the best choice. Have you ever heard Li Si rebutting anyone? In terms of knowledge, Li Si is ten times better than Feng Qie. He is wise and may have even surpassed Shang Yang. From his Three Premiers Nine Ministers organization, he is most suited to be the Law minister and handle our great laws of Qin. I can also use his talent to build a lawful country in preparation of uniting the world one day."

Xiang Shaolong is dumbfounded. In terms of ruling a country, he would not dare to debate with the man who will unite China.

At the end of the day, the Law Minister is still considered a high ranking post and Li Si should be contented.

At the same time, he can see his own influence over Xiao

Pan. Because Feng Qie speaks like himself, Xiao Pan immediately has a high opinion of him.

Success is no coincidence. It is because Xiao Pan is capable of putting talent to good use which gives him the opportunity to conquer the world.

Turning happy, Xiao Pan continued in a low voice: "Little Jun has told me everything about the farm battle. I cannot believe it is so exciting. Master could be even better than Bai Qi. If Master fields an army in the future, I am sure you will be undefeated."

Xiang Shaolong smiled to himself; this is his worst fear. Since Xiao Pan has this idea already, he will have to act accordingly sooner or later. Luckily, it is not an immediate concern. Changing the topic, he asked: "How did Lu Buwei shift the blame off himself?"

A cold murderous look flashed past Xiao Pan's eyes. He detailed: "He released them unconditionally and find a few scapegoats to be executed, saying they are the masterminds. Thus, there is no way we can verify anything. If not for the Black Dragon scheme, I would have summoned him privately and kill him personally. Hng! Meng Ao deserves to be killed too. Fortunately, he has two capable sons."

He faced Xiang Shaolong and implored: "Has the Black Dragon been completed?"

Xiang Shaolong explained the details.

Xiao Pan sighed: "Thank Heavens that Master has came up

with this miraculous solution or I would not know how to counter Lu Buwei. Hei! My success today is all owed...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted: “Don’t say such things. Crown Prince has been chosen by Heaven to unite the world. As your subordinate, I am just doing my best!”

Deeply moved, Xiao Pan could not say anything for a while. Finally, he sighed: “Yesterday, Empress moved to Oasis Palace!”

Oasis Palace is situated north of the city among other royal buildings. It is considered to be a position that opposes the main palace. Since Zhu Ji has moved there without her son, their relationship must be in dire straits.

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “Did you have a big fight with her?”

With a wronged expression, Xiao Pan shook his head: “On the contrary. I have listened to Master’s instructions and did my best to repair my relationship with her. When she brought up the topic of moving to Oasis Palace, I did my best to make her stay but she was completely oblivious to my pleas. I smell a rat too. Hei! Actually, it is better that she moved out. I need not witness her scandalous acts.”

Xiang Shaolong understands that he is referring to Zhu Ji and Lao Ai’s illicit affair. He felt funny too. By right, Zhu Ji should stay in the palace to maintain her influence over politics and power. Why did she choose to leave Xianyang Palace? He had a brainwave and recalled Qin Qing. Based on her information network, she is the best person to investigate this strange behaviour.

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Does she partake in the morning court sessions and official meetings?"

Xiao Pan smiled: "Of course she will not give up her power. She may not always be present but insists that every edict must be approved by her regardless of importance. Now, dealing with her is even more difficult than before. The most annoying issue is the rise of Lao Ai. Acting like her spokesman, he has been quite vocal and is always sowing discord between Empress and others. I wish I can kill him with one stroke."

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Since this is the case, we should support him and make him the official representative of Empress. With his insatiable ambition, he will clash with Lu Buwei sooner or later. When that happens, we can sit by the side and enjoy a good show."

Xiao Pan is incensed: "But every time I see him, I am so irritated..."

Xiang Shaolong smilingly cut him off: "To achieve big things, we must have tolerance and real skills, doing what others cannot do. Ultimately, Lao Ai is only a clown who is only good at ganging up with other crooks. The damage he can cause can never match up to Lu Buwei. He is only good with the Empress backing him. In other's opinion, he is still Lu Buwei's man but if we can make him more powerful, it is as good as creating more trouble for Lu Buwei. Crown Prince, I think we should tolerate him for a few more years!"

Xiao Pan realised: "Master is right. As long as I am not

coroneted, I have to give face to Empress. Hei! Before she moved, she insisted that I make Lao Ao a marquis. I declined immediately. From that day onwards, she refused to co sign my edicts, making it hard for the officials to begin their work. Ai! I guess I have to comply with her.”

Xiang Shaolong commented: “A wise man act according to circumstances. Crown Prince can let Empress know that after the Spring Festival, when it is time to make new changes, you will promote Lao Ai to be a marquis.”

Xiao Pan was perplexed: “It is not so easy. Empress even wanted me to promote a few of his cronies. For example, Lao Ai wants his own clansman Lao Si to be the Interior Minister. There is also Ling Qi and Han Jie who are his new recruits. Empress wants them to be promoted too and I can feel a headache coming.”

Xiang Shaolong already saw this coming. Without these implementations, Lao Ai will not dare to rebel in the future.

He comforted: “No matter how powerful they grow, they cannot accomplish much. To gain Empress’s support, Crown Prince has to bear with this. Don’t fret. Lu Buwei’s headache is worse than yours!”

Xiao Pan thought about it and laughed: “Somehow, everything is easily solved when they come to you. I will follow Master’s advice.”

After further discussion, Xiang Shaolong left the palace and went to find Qin Qing.



They had only parted shortly but Xiang Shaolong is already here to see her. Qin Qing is especially delighted and received him in the inner hall.

Since they mated, Xiang Shaolong has to focus on his training so they did not have any more close contact. Meeting her in the inner hall, they both felt intimacy and some awkwardness at the same time. It was simply refreshing and yet they felt lost too.

In the end, Xiang Shaolong held her hand and asked: "Have you heard that Empress is moving to Oasis Palace?"

Qin Qing's eye brows tightened and she whispered: "I knew it the moment I came back. The attendants she brought to the Oasis Palace are all her own people so I am afraid I cannot conduct any investigation for you."

Pulling her to the rear garden, Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing came to a bridge and sat down on the railings. With one hand hugging her slender waist, Xiang Shaolong pondered; "There must be a reason for her moving. I wonder what it is."

With his arm around her, Qin Qing's body turned soft instantly and leaned onto him, pressing her own leg against his. Despite the cold winter, her face is burning hot like the summer sun. She joyfully whined: "Can Official Xiang watch his behaviour? The servants may see us!"

Xiang Shaolong let out a loud laugh and lifted her to sit on his lap.

Qin Qing cried out in panic and lost her balance. When she straightened herself, her lips are already locked onto his.

After a round of kissing and teasing, a satisfied Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: "This is to punish you for calling me Official Xiang. Do you plead guilty?"

Qin Qing was feeling sweet in her heart. Shooting him a charming look, she wailed; "So domineering!"

Xiang Shaolong is intoxicated by her charm. He hates himself for losing his ability to conceive after coming to this era. If he can impregnate Qin Qing or Ji Yanran, it will be really blissful. Thinking about this, his body shook uncontrollably.

Seeing his changed expression, Qin Qing was shocked: "What is it?"

Looking at the far distance, Xiang Shaolong whispered: "This is bad. Empress must be pregnant."

Stepping into the Wu Residence, he heard that Zou Yan is back. Xiang Shaolong is overjoyed and inquired on his whereabouts. Zou Yan is chatting with Ji Yanran in the inner chamber and he hurriedly joined them.

Looking great as normal, Zou Yan is also glad to see Xiang Shaolong.

Ji Yanran has already told him the reason for inviting him back. After dinner, Zou Yan dragged Xiang Shaolong to the garden pavilion for a chat. Ji Yanran naturally tagged along. Snowflakes are flying through the sky and illuminated by their lamps, making it a pleasant sight.

Xiang Shaolong embarrassedly began: "Because of us, we have to bother godfather to come all the way here. We are really..."

Zou Yan chuckled and interrupted: "Since when did Shaolong become so polite? You need not feel bad as I am also thinking of travelling back to Qi and see my old friends."

Xiang Shaolong remembered Shan Rou and was about to say something when Ji Yanran indicated: "You need not say it. I have already told godfather to help us search for Sister Rou. Based on his contacts in Qi, this should be an easy task."

He was beginning to get worried about Shan Rou. Thus, Xiang Shaolong is comforted to know this news. Shan Rou's swordsmanship is outstanding so it should be easy to locate her.

Sitting down beside a stone table, Zou Yan's eyes twinkled and he state in a deep voice: "To think that in my senior years, I, Zou Yan, is able to help cultivate a New Saint. There are many miracles in this world but none are as amazing as this."

Ji Yanran gently informed Xiang Shaolong: "Godfather has completed his masterpiece <<The Five Virtues Theory>> and has ordered me to safe keep it for him!"

Xiang Shaolong was feeling strange about this. In a way, he understood that Zou Yan can foresee the future and know that Xiao Pan will unite the world. Therefore, he decided to leave his masterpiece in Qin. Otherwise, it may be destroyed or lost during wars. He was inspired: "Godfather, feel free to

tell us what to do with your <<Five Virtues Theory>>.”

His eyes shining with pleasure, Zou Yan smiled: “When the Black Dragon appears, Shaolong will be responsible for presenting it to Crown Prince Zheng. This is a hundred times better than me propagating it.”

Ji Yanran was blown away: “Godfather is leaving us before the Black Dragon event?”

Zou Yan shook his head, sighing: “Heaven has its plans and I don’t think I can wait so long. Even if you two did not look for me, I would have looked for you to settle my last wishes.”

Ji Yanran’s face lost colour at once. Taking a panic look at Xiang Shaolong, she wailed: “Godfather!”

Zou Yan gave a carefree laugh: “Spring leaves and Summer comes. This is nature and humans are the same. Yanran, do you not understand?”

Ji Yanran is not ordinary person. Forcing a smile, she agreed: “Godfather is right! Thanks for the advice.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. Feeling melancholic, he recited the words of the famous Song Dynasty philosopher Su Shi: “Humans meet and part, undergo joy and sorrow. The moon becomes full and crescent dependingly. Godfather is right.”

Zou Yan is astounded and stared at him along with Ji Yanran for a while before praising: “Shaolong is very better than me in seeing past life and death.”

Pausing, he added: "Lu Buwei still has some luck on his side. Before the Crown Prince coronation, Shaolong must bear with him. Do not confront him directly and I can rest in peace."

Xiang Shaolong could not help but sincerely respect him from the bottom of his heart. Zou Yan is surely the most intelligent man during this ancient period. Only he, Xiang Shaolong, can truly appreciate his deep wisdom. No wonder his five virtues theory is able to spread far and wide, applying to politics, science and even the arts.

Zou Yan continued to stare at the falling snow in silence.

Ji Yanran softly asked: "Godfather! When we create a Black Dragon like this, are we deceiving the gods?"

Zou Yan laughed: "It is something really creative! But Heaven has decreed that the new Saint will be Crown Prince Zheng whose rise will be due to Shaolong's efforts. Although the six states have some might now, they are fools who plot against one another. In the future when the Crown Prince has received full authority, the end of the six states will be in sight."

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: "After all, Godfather is a Qi native. Why are you not worried about your own country's fate?"

Zou Yan calmly replied: "Qi just happens to be my birth place. My mission is to help unite the world. Moreover, the present King is an idiot. Thinking about this, I could not help but feel angry."

Ji Yanran added: "Godfather and I have the same view. Only when the world is united can the people enjoy real peace and harmony. But when I thought of Shaolong's 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely', I am concerned that Crown Prince Zheng may change and is no longer the wise and responsible person he is now. That is a system flaw."

Xiang Shaolong unwittingly let out Heaven's Secret: "This will only change when the people become democratic and rule the country as a representative group of people rather than a single monarch. But that will only take place around two thousand years later."

Zou Yan and Ji Yanran are totally swept away. After exchanging looks with each other, Ji Yanran curiously asked: "How can there be such a system? How does hubby know for sure that this will take place two thousand years later?"

Kicking himself, Xiang Shaolong shook his head and awkwardly replied: "I am just making a wild guess!"

Zou Yan smiled: "Shaolong often speaks with great wisdom, proving that you are no ordinary man. Otherwise, my dear daughter will not love you wholeheartedly."

He looked up to the sky again. The moon and stars are absent and the sky is filled with countless snowflakes. He bleakly concluded: "It is late! I need to rest early. Tomorrow, I will head back to Qi."

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran exchanged a glance, understanding that this great philosopher has consulted astrology and predicted that his death is near.

This is their last reunion.

## CHAPTER 2

## A Grand Scheme

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE next morning, Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran and the others sent Zou Yan out of the City. After accompanying him for ten over miles on foot did they finally bade farewell.

Zou Yan left with a laugh and took off with about a hundred family warriors. Wu Guo led a thousand Cavalry soldiers to continue escorting him.

By the time Xiang Shaolong is back at Xianyang City, it is already evening time.



The snowstorm that ended last night started once again.

Thinking about this final departure, he was filled with extreme grief!

He was experiencing mixed emotions after interacting with this great philosopher who also happens to be one of China's foremost mathematician.

If not for this great man, he may not gain Talented Lady Ji's love or may have even lost his life back at Daliang.

Stepping into the residence, Tao Fang welcomed: "Ying Ying has been waiting for you for almost an hour in the eastern chamber."

Xiang Shaolong frowned upon hearing this. Excusing himself from his wives, he headed to the eastern chamber.

Ying Ying is reaching the end of her patience. The moment she saw him, she snarled: "Where the hell have you been?"

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden revelation. Even if Ying Ying changes her mind, he will never accept her love.

This is not because she is Guan Zhongxie's woman. For a modern man like him, a woman's virginity is unimportant.

In the past, he has been wooing her because he is doing it as a favour to the Lord Changping brothers and he is lecherous too. But after knowing her better, all his feelings for her have been eradicated by her fickle-mindedness and her lack of priorities. Even if someone holds a knife to his neck, he will not be willing to pursue her anymore.

After this enlightening revelation, Xiang Shaolong politely invited her to take a seat, asking: "What can I do for Miss Ying?"

Sensing the cold and unfriendly tone in his voice, Ying Ying was momentarily stunned. Lowering her head, she protested: "I know that you are feeling troubled. Ai! I don't know what to say. You will be fighting Zhongxie in three days and I am really worried for you!"

Seeing that she is not here to dissuade him from fighting, Xiang Shaolong's impression of her improved slightly. Recollecting his new secret weapon: Hundred Battle Sabre and his new set of sabre skills, he smiled: "Thanks for your kindness. Life is full of battles, isn't it? Only from battles can life becoming more exciting."

Frankly speaking, if not for Guan Zhongxie's challenge, he may not have created this wonderful sabre skill.

Ying Ying raised her head slightly and panic is written all over her face. She advised: "I don't know why I come to find you. Zhongxie has been practising his swordplay every day and has analyzed every move to counter spear attacks. Ai! Everyone knows that you are not good with spear fighting. Even with the Flying Dragon Spear, I am afraid... Ai! I am very worried!"

Xiang Shaolong plainly checked: "Aren't you worried about Guan Zhongxie?"

Ying Ying nodded her head slightly and softly remarked: "It is best not to fight but I know no one can make both of you

change your minds.”

Lowering her head again, she slowly thanked: “Thanks for your advice that day. I have given deep thought over your words and have agreed to marry Yang Duanhe. I haven’t informed my brothers yet. After the duel, Duanhe will seek my hand in marriage.”

was taken aback but at the same time, he set his mind at ease Xiang Shaolong.

He has met Yang Duanhe before and he is the most outstanding military leader under Wang Ci’s command. In the past, Lu Gong and Xu Xian thought highly of him too. However, he has no idea that Duanhe is also wooing Ying Ying.

Based on the current circumstances, whoever that marries Ying Ying will gain plenty of favours with the military and royal family. Only Guan Zhongxie is an exception.

Slightly fearful, Ying Ying peeped at his expression and tested: “Are you unhappy?”

Xiang Shaolong naturally would not show his strong feelings to her. He is certain that she really loves Guan Zhongxie so even if she does not marry him (Guan Zhongxie), she cannot marry himself (Guan Zhongxie) too. He solemnly state: “This is a wise decision. Yang Duanhe is an excellent man.”

Ying Ying stared at him angrily in silence.

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Since Miss has decided on her future, she should not waver again.”

Ying Ying intimately asked: "Don't you blame me at all?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "What do you want me to say?"

There couldn't be a better answer than this. Ying Ying calmed down and thought for some time. Finally, she concluded: "Be careful!"

She stood up.

Xiang Shaolong sent her to the door. Just before she left, Ying Ying whispered: "If I can choose, I want you to win. This is not only because of me but also for Qin. I have finally understood the big picture."

Before she finished speaking, hot tears are already gushing out of her eyes. Helplessly looking at him intimately for one last time, she turned around and leapt up her horse, galloping away.

In a daze, Xiang Shaolong stared at the snow clad Xianyang City, thinking about the end of this relationship. He swore never to get involved with any more beauties for as long as he lives.

But thinking back, it is hard to know what fate has in store for him.

Madam Zhuang and Li Yanyan are two good examples.

Back at the inner hall, just as he is enjoying some playtime with Xiang Bao'er, Teng Yi and Jing Jun came back from work. Teng Yi has a stern expression on his face while Jing Jun has an apologetic look.

Ji Yanran knew that something is amiss and asked for an explanation.

Sitting down, Teng Yi slapped the table and scolded: "I have told this kid umpteen times not to mess with Guoxin. How was I to know that he could not hold back when he saw him?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Second Brother, calm down first. Little Jun, tell me what this is all about."

Everyone was shocked at Xiang Shaolong's indifferent attitude. Even Jing Jun was stunned. He explained: "Third Brother knows me best. Ai. I am not saying Second Brother does not know me but it is two different kinds of knowing."

Teng Yi was amused and Wu Tingfang cannot help but laughed: "Don't beat around the bush. What is it?"

Putting on a helpless and innocent expression, Jing Jun shrugged his shoulders: "I am not the chief troublemaker this time. I was just touring Drunken Wind Brothel and ran into those basterds from Weinan Martial Arts School. Naturally, Scarface Guoxin is among them. I intended to ignore them but they made some sarcastic remarks and even insulted Third Brother. I won't repeat what they said but they are very arrogant because they have Lao Ai supporting them. I can bear with personal insults but I cannot take it when they slander Third Brother."

Zhao Zhi frowned: "What did they actually say?"

Teng Yi replied in a deep voice: "They did go too far with

their comments. They mentioned that Third Brother is Lu Buwei's gay partner. Hei. To think they even dare to spread such rumours."

Her eyes shining with agitation, Ji Yanran coldly hissed: "If I hear it personally, I will kill them all on the spot."

Wu Tingfang was furious: "Little Jun, what did you do to them?"

Jing Jun bitterly smiled: "There are only eight of us but there are ten over of them. Moreover, Guoxin is highly skilled so we did not gain much advantage and two of our men are injured. Incidentally, Lao Ai showed up and got them to back off and apologise. As Second Brother has instructed, I avoided any confrontation with Lao Ai. Holding my anger, I left immediately but Second Brother still holds it against me."

Teng Yi chided: "What did I tell you? I have told you many times not to patronise the brothels but you keep disobeying me."

Xiang Shaolong was still as composed as ever because he had long anticipated Lao Ai to become more and more insolent.

After a short contemplation, he questioned: "What are the kinds of people in Weinan Martial Arts School?"

Jing Jun took the chance to redeem himself: "The best fighter is naturally the School Founder and Master Qui Risheng. There are quite a significant number of military

leaders who are graduates of this school. After him are the three key instructors which includes Guoxin. The other two are Changjie and Jinliang. All of them are first rate swordsmen who are now working together with Lao Ai. In a way, Lao Ai has more than a hundred family warriors after they joined him. These men hoped to be promoted based on Lao Ai's close relationship with Empress. I heard that Lu Buwei is very dissatisfied with the school's reopening but cannot say anything because of Empress's support!"

Teng Yi added: "The fighters in Weinan Martial Arts School are made up of swordsmen from different states. Not everyone is a top fighter but there are some experts among them too. Every one of them is using you as an inspiration and hope to defeat you. By defeating you, that person will be crowned the number one swordsman of Qin and his value will increase by many folds. Ai! Everyone thought that you are the Crown Prince's favourite subject because of your sword skill!"

Xiang Shaolong fantasized that this is always the worry of being the number one swordsman as always read in wuxia novels. If not for his high official post and his Guardians protecting him, he would have been waylaid on the streets every now and then.

Nodding, he swore: "Let them say whatever they like! My conscience is clear. If they go overboard, we shall not hesitate to act too but everything must come after my duel with Guan Zhongxie. We will lay low for the time being. If we are forced to act, we will go all the way and send Qiu

Risheng to meet his maker.”

His eyes shining icily, he stared right at Jing Jun and commanded: “You have Lu Dan’er already. Take care of your health and improve your skills. Otherwise, when we face off with the Weinan Martial Arts School, you will not be able to take your revenge. Understand?”

It is not often Xiang Shaolong speaks so harshly to Jing Jun, making him sweat profusely and nodding his head non-stop in agreement.

Scanning the crowd, Xiang Shaolong laughed vociferously: “One fine day, we shall confront them and let them have a taste of Second Brother’s Mozi Sword, Yanran’s Flying Dragon Spear and my Hundred Battle Sabre!”

It was early next morning.

Xiang Shaolong began practising the Hundred Battle Sabre Play. The area surrounding him became enveloped with cold flashes of sabre energy. It was powerful beyond measure.

His sparring partner is Teng Yi. Even with Teng Yi’s ability, he cannot attack with the Mozi Sword. However, Mozi Swordplay focuses on defence. With his stronger arm strength and heavier wooden sword, he can still defend himself against the numerous attacks from all different directions.

Seeing the Hundred Battle Sabre in action for the first time, Jing Jun and Tao Fang’s jaws dropped, as they can never envision such a fearsome weapon and such ruthless and



swift attacks.

Every time the two weapons clash, a loud sound is produced, adding to the excitement of the fight.

Since they started fighting, both men have exchanged over a hundred strokes but Teng Yi is still unable to find a loophole in the Hundred Battle Sabre Play to counter attack.

Xiang Shaolong is having the time of his life. Using his knowledge of many schools of martial arts and the use of science and body momentum, he applied it to the chopping attack nature of the Hundred Battle Sabre. Adding to the heavy sabre weight and intricate footsteps, the power of the sabre attacks is maximised. Like an endless torrent of earth crushing attacks, any enemy would be hard pressed to defend. Even with Teng Yi's ability, he is at a losing end.

Out of a sudden, Wu Tingfang screamed: "Stop!"

Puzzled, Xiang Shaolong retreated and retrieved his sabre.

Everyone stared at her in amazement.

Her face turning pink, Wu Tingfang awkwardly explained: "Don't look at me this way. I am afraid that hubby will really fight Second Brother like he will fight Guan Zhongxie!"

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a look and burst out laughing.

Looking at his own right hand that was shaking because of over exertion, Teng Yi panted: "Tingfang is right to call for a stop, otherwise; I may be disgraced in public. The Hundred

Battle Sabre may be powerful but the real might comes from Third Brother's sabre play. Although it may be straight chopping styles, the changes are unlimited and the angles are precise as if it was directed by the immortals themselves. It is definitely worthy of its name."

Xiang Shaolong smiled at Jing Jun: "Does Little Jun want to give it a try?"

Jing Jun bitterly smiled: "Can we do it tomorrow? I am already terrified to death and cannot find the courage to fight you."

Everyone saw that Jing Jun is so intimidated and burst out into laughter.

Tao Fang remarked: "After witnessing Shaolong's prowess, I can't wait for your duel with Guan Zhongxie!"

At this moment, Wu Guang came to Xiang Shaolong's side and whispered a few words. Xiang Shaolong handed the Hundred Battle Sabre to Zhao Zhi before gesturing to Teng Yi, Jing Jun and his wives to follow him towards the main hall.

Teng Yi caught up to him and inquired: "What is it?"

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "Meng Wu and Meng Tian have come secretly to see us."

After paying their respects and getting seated, Meng Wu sincerely praised: "Official Xiang is truly a military genius. Tang Yi is the best general under my father's wings but was soundly defeated despite having numerous advantages."

Meng Tian added: "Father was infuriated but was powerless too. But we know him too well; he will never let the matter rest."

The three ladies exchanged looks, finally aware that Meng Ao did not take the risk of leading the attack personally.

Meng Wu was frustrated: "We still do not understand why Father is so loyal towards Lu Buwei that heartless traitor."

Meng Tian surmised: "It must be that beauty that Lu Buwei sent to seduce Father. Now, Father no longer listens to Mother. Mother has reminded us many times that Lu Buwei is a ruthless man and will die a horrible death. Father may be muddle-headed but we will not follow in his footsteps. Ai!"

Xiang Shaolong and the rest finally understood why they are willing to switch loyalty. Except for the strong relationship they built while escaping Lu Buwei's assassination, it also involves their family conflict.

Their best buddy Jing Jun puffed his chest: "Relax! The Crown Prince knows that the both of you are loyal subjects. No matter what your father does, both of you will not be implicated."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Little Jun is right. I have told Crown Prince everything and he will assign important tasks for both of you. Now, the most important thing is you must not let your father know that both of you have switch allegiance. In the future, you can inherit your father's family warriors."

Both men were overwhelmed and excited. Meng Wu

intimately asked: "Is Crown Prince going to do something against Father?"

Xiang Shaolong acknowledges that the main source of Lu Buwei's power arises from Meng Ao which allows him to last until Xiao Pan's coronation. Based on this, Meng Ao should be fine these years. He predicted: "You can set your mind at ease. Your father will be fine before the Crown Prince coronation. Use these five years to learn, grow and do your best. When the Crown Prince is crowned King, all these problems will be solved. I will ask the Crown Prince to be lenient on your Father based on your merits."

Both men were very touched and immediately kowtowed.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly helped them up. Recalling that Meng Tian will be Qin's best general after Wang Jian, he could not help but feel a sense of pride and wonder at the same time.

He instructed them further before allowing them to leave.

At the main door, Meng Wu worriedly advised: "Official Xiang must be diligent when fighting Guan Zhongxie the day after tomorrow. Yesterday, he came to our residence to look for sparring partners. Both of us fought against him too but we barely lasted a minute. He is much more formidable compared to the hunting fair duel."

Meng Tian interrupted: "Can Official Xiang defeat him? This will make that traitor Lu vomit blood."

Jing Jun smiled: "Don't worry. My Third Brother is like a

general from Heaven. Even if Guan Zhongxie has three heads and six arms, he will be defeated for sure.”

Both brothers stared at Xiang Shaolong with suspicion.

Teng Yi accosted them and smiled: “Little Jun is not bullshitting this time. Your uncle Xiang has even defeated me soundly. Just wait and enjoy the show.”

Both men knew of Teng Yi’s skill and his truthful disposition so they managed to put aside their worries for the time being.

Meng Tian’s eyes suddenly reddened. Lowering his head, he swore: “This time, we are against our father not only because Lu Buwei tried to kill us and Mother. We must also take revenge for Princess Qian and the maids. When it is time to attack him in the future, you must include us in your plans.”

Xiang Shaolong was reminded of their close relationship with the girls. His heart swelled up with pain and he shook his head, sighing.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun knows that he is feeling despondent over the past and quickly led the brothers away.

The three men headed back to the Command Centre and were having lunch when an attendant reported that Wang Ci is here to see him. Xiang Shaolong put down his chopsticks and went to see him in the main hall.

Xiang Shaolong got Wang Ci to be seated in the higher ranked seat, remarking: “Great General need not come all

the way here. As long as you send the order, I will report at your General Residence.”

Wang Ci smiled: “Aren’t you afraid that I may change my mind and try to assassinate you again?”

Xiang Shaolong jested: “If Great General wants my life, it is as easy as killing an ant!”

Wang Ci shook his head: “Your life is not so easy to take. Even Lu Buwei and Meng Ao have been defeated soundly by you and are at their wit’s end.”

Pausing, his brows furrowed deeper and he solemnly revealed: “Lu Buwei does have the intention to rebel. Using the excuse of needing men to build the Zhengguo Canal, he got the military seal from Crown Prince and Empress and began redeploying the troops. If not for my strong insistence that my army remains untouched, Xianyang City will be in his hands by now. But sooner or later, I may have to field a campaign and I will be too far to protect Xianyang City. The Crown Prince will be in serious danger. Does Shaolong have any solution?”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to tell him that everything will change after the Black Dragon sighting but he felt that it is better that less people know about this secret. He turned the question around: “Does Great General have any suggestion?”

Wang Ci thought for some time and sighed: “Because I refused to kill you, my relationship with Lu Buwei is strained. You should know that if Tian Dan attacks Yan, Lu Buwei will

force Meng Ao and me to attack the Three Allied States. That will also be the best time for him to create chaos. If all of Xianyang City's standby army is made up of soldiers loyal to him, then Empress and Crown Prince are as good as dead."

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief: "That should happen in Spring next year. Yan is in the extreme north and winter is very harsh there. Tian Dan needs some time to prepare too so we still have some time to plan."

Wang Ci is displeased: "Since Guan Zhong took over as the Premier of Qi, the nation should enjoy progress. Unfortunately, the people of Qi are only good at bragging and lack military preparedness. Once, they were nearly annihilated by Yan which is much smaller than them. Although Tian Dan appeared, they are only good at surviving and nothing else. If not for Zhao between us and them, we would have conquered their lands a long time ago."

Taking this chance, Xiang Shaolong clarified: "Zhao has lost Lian Po so can they still be considered a threat to us?"

With a suspicious expression, Wang Ci sighed: "The best armies and generals are from Zhao. If not for the muddle-headed King Xiaocheng using Zhao Gua instead of Lian Po, Bai Qi may not necessary win the Battle of Changping. Lian Po may be gone but Li Mu is still around. This man is unfathomable in terms of fighting a war. In fact, he is better than Zhao's King Wuling. His tactics are unpredictable and he attacks when he is least expected to. If you ever meet him on the battlefield, you must never let your guard down or be

prepared to take a heavy loss.”

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong prayed that it will never happen too. Concurrently, he was filled with respect at this famous general who has achieved such a godly reputation.

Recollecting the day when Li Mu heroically gave him Bloodwave and even advised him to come to Qin, telling him that should they ever meet on the battlefield, they should fight each other to death. Not many men can match up to his depth.

Wang Ci groaned: “As long as Li Mu is around, we can forget about attacking Zhao.”

Each in his own thoughts, both men are sighing and momentarily forgotten their present danger.

Wang Ci suddenly brought up: “Does Shaolong know that after Chongqiao has been promoted to be Marquis Changan, he has been in secret contact with Zhao General Pang Nuan. With Du Bi’s support, he has been recruiting men and buying horses. If Xianyang City is in chaos, he will surely come back to vie for the throne. He still has many supporters and you must guard against this.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a big headache coming. So it is really not easy to help Xiao Pan become Qin Shi Huang after all. Nodding his head to acknowledge this, he sighed: “Lu Buwei should be more worried than me. He is the first person Du Bi and Chongqiao want to kill. My turn will come much later and Lu Buwei will not take this lying down.”



Wang Ci stifled his laughter: "Talking about scheming, we are not Lu Buwei's match. These few nights, I have been drinking with Wang He. Whenever we spoke about this, Wang He says that Lu Buwei is purposely allowing Du Bi and Chongqiao to run amok. With this threat hanging over their heads, Empress and Crown Prince will still have to rely on him."

Xiang Shaolong had seen this coming. He asked: "What is the relationship between Du Bi and Lady Xiuli?"

Lady Xiuli is the other concubine of King Zhuangxiang and Chongqiao's mother.

Wang Ci replied: "They are cousins but we all know that there is something going on between them."

Pausing, Wang Ci realised that they have drifted too far off the original topic. He officially suggested: "I have a plan. I heard that you are quite close to the people of Chu. Can you persuade Li Yuan that if Qi annihilates Yan, then Chu will be his next target? Get him to deploy soldiers near the Qi-Chu border so that Tian Dan will not attack Yan recklessly."

Xiang Shaolong slapped the table and praised this wonderful tactic. At the end of the day, Wang Ci is still more experienced than him. This is akin to surrounding Wei to save Zhao. Moreover, Li Yuan hates Tian Dan to the core and Chu is safe from Qin because of the buffer of the Three Allied States. He nodded in agreement: "This is easy; I will get someone to write a letter to Li Yuan immediately. Consider it done."

Wang Ci officially state: "This is crucial. Shaolong must do his best to persuade Li Yuan!"

Xiang Shaolong respectfully consented: "I know!"

Wang Ci is pleased: "If we can delay Qi's attack of Yan, when Wang Jian is back and Huan Yi, Wang Ben has the new army ready, I can set off with a peace of mind."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he has secured at least one quarter of the Qin military support and was comforted. Recalling Jing Jun's marriage proposal, he sincerely explained it to Wang Ci.

Wang Ci laughed loudly: "No problem. I will get Wang He later to visit the Lu Residence later. Wait for my good news!"

In a second, his expression darkened as he was reminded of Lu Gong and Xu Xian.

After some time, he reminiscence: "Does Shaolong know that Lu Gong is not originally surnamed Lu? During the hunting fair, his hunting catch of deer is unmatched so the late King conferred him the title of Deer King (Lu Wang). Thus, he changed his surname to Lu and as he grows older, people called him Lu Gong (Deer Senior)!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Does Great General know that I am no longer called Xiang Shaolong but Long Shaoxiang? I did swear to write my name backwards if Tian Dan manages to return back to Qi safely."

Wang Ci was stunned for a while before he left, laughing.



## CHAPTER 3

## Irreconcilable

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER Wang Ci left, Xiang Shaolong summoned Jing Jun and informed him that Wang Ci has agreed to propose marriage for him and will even bring Wang He along. With a joyful cry, Jing Jun somersaulted several times on the spot and skipped away happily.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi watched in amusement.

Teng Yi's eyes are glittering with tears and signs of memory recall.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is thinking of his first wife and several kinsmen who have died a tragic death and felt sad too.

Teng Yi sighed: "If not for that tragedy, Little Jun will not enjoy today's fortune. Heaven's Will is truly unfathomable. No matter what, our brotherhood will stand the test of time."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that it is not Heaven's Will that is unfathomable but that there is no way to change the Will of Heaven! He himself is living in history and it seems like there is no way he can change anything too.

Teng Yi suggested: "Third Brother can go home to take a rest. I can handle the workload. Except for the occasional disturbance by people of the Premier Mentor Residence, the city is generally peaceful."

Remembering the incident where the Zhou siblings were being beaten up in public, he shook his head, sighing: "Guan Zhongxie is not an upright man so his men are rotten too. When I kill him the day after tomorrow, either you or Little Jun will take charge of the Imperial Infantry. Only till then can the citizens of Xianyang City enjoy real peace."

Teng Yi laughed: "If you let those people who think you will lose hear these words, they will be bewildered and assume that you are just bragging. Only for those like me who have fought against your Hundred Battle Sabre will understand that you are in fact very humble."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Teng Yi to have a humorous

side of him and laughed too: "To be happy, we must work hard for happiness. From my experience of fighting Lian Jin and Wang Jian, every duel I fought has changed my life. I wonder how will my life change after the duel with Guan Zhongxie?"

Teng Yi stood up and escorted him out of the Command Centre main gate. As they walked side by side, Teng Yi remarked: "It is not all hard work but wisdom too. I really cannot comprehend how you can design such a fearsome weapon and a deadly skill to match it. When you went out alone to practice at the farms, Yanran, Qin Qing and I were talking about you. We all agreed that you are deeply mysterious and seems to have the ability to foretell the future. Do you remember that night at Qin Qing's residence? All she said was Lu Buwei wanted to punish Lao Ai for harassing her and you can predict the rest of Lu Buwei's actions. That is something impossible."

Guilt-ridden, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "That is just a moment of inspiration! Second Brother need not think too much."

At the gate, Xiang Shaolong patted Teng Yi on the shoulder and joked: "Thanks for Second Brother's reminder. I will make a detour to Qin Qing's place. In this cold and snowy weather, there is no warmer place than a beauty's bosom."

Amidst their laughter, Jing Shan came up to them with Jifeng. Xiang Shaolong somersaulted onto the horse and rode towards the Qin Residence. The northern wind is blowing hard and large amount of snow is accumulated

everywhere. There is hardly any passer bys.

As Teng Yi watched Xiang Shaolong galloped off, he could not help by feel a sense of wonder.

This steadfast brother of his is not only changing the fates of everyone around him but is even changing the fate of everything under the sky.

At Qin Qing's residence, the beauty reported with suspicion: "Your guess that Empress is pregnant with Lao Ai's child is not without basis. Yesterday, the Empress sent some men to Yong Du. It is speculated that she intends to move to the Dazheng Palace there. Needless to say, she is afraid of being exposed."

A guess is a guess and facts are facts. Now that this guess has been proven to be a fact, Xiang Shaolong's mind is in turmoil and he had to sit down for a while.

The women in this era will use herbs to prevent pregnancy if they wanted to make love without bearing offspring of their partner. That is why Zhu Ji can service Zhao Mu, Guo Kai and many others in Handan City without being impregnated. Now, she willingly got herself pregnant for Lao Ai. This proves that she is completely under his control.

One can say she no longer view Xiao Pan as her child. In the future, she will whole heartedly support Lao Ai and hope that he can replace Xiao Pan.

Qin Qing can tell that he is troubled and quietly sat down beside him.

Xiang Shaolong inquired in a deep voice: "Where is Yong Du?"

Qin Qing answered: "Yong Du is our old capital. Like Xianyang City, it is north of River Wei and is about a hundred miles upriver. You can reach there by boat within three days. It is a huge place with Dazheng Palace and Zhannian Palace. It is also the city with the most temples and religious activities."

Xiang Shaolong fell into Qin Qing's bosom and laid down, using her laps as a pillow. Gazing at her unrivalled beautiful face and features, he sighed: "I think Lao Ai will become another Lu Buwei in no time."

Qin Qing was annoyed: "Isn't this part of your grand plan?"

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to reply.

How is he supposed to tell Qin Qing that he knows the future and can only act accordingly? Even he has to tolerate the rise of Lao Ai so that one day, Lao Ai will contend with Lu Buwei according to the historical records.

He was indeed the mastermind behind this scheme and in fact, everything is proceeding very smoothly. But due to his deep feelings and guilt for Zhu Ji, he felt terrible inside.

He remained silent.

Instead, Qin Qing comforted: "I am sorry! My words are too harsh. At the end of the day, it is not your fault entirely. You are also acting to circumstances! If Lao Ai listened to every command of Lu Buwei, many people including you would



have lost their lives already!”

Xiang Shaolong hooked his hand around Qin Qing’s neck and forced her to bend down, enjoying a fulfilling kiss together. He stretched himself and decided: “I am staying here tonight!”

Qin Qing was embarrassed and shocked at the same time. “How can we do this?” she cried.

Xiang Shaolong knew long ago she will not be so daring and is just teasing her. Sitting up, he hugged her and softly asked: “Didn’t you say I can do whatever I want?”

Qin Qing solemnly state: “At least you must finish your duel first! Otherwise, Yanran and the others will blame me!”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: “It is decided then! If Grand Tutor Qin breaks her promise, don’t blame me for forcing myself on you.”

Qin Qing was stunned: “Forcing yourself on me! Ai! You are terrible! Ai! Get lost! I am not speaking to you anymore.”

Looking at her angry yet delighted expression, Xiang Shaolong can feel all his troubles disappearing. After taking advantage of her again, he left with a happy heart.

Leaving her residence, he saw that it is still early so he entered the palace to look for Li Si. He also took the chance to tell Li Si about Xiao Pan’s intention to make him the Law Minister.

Initially, he thought that Li Si will be disappointed.

Unexpectedly, Li Si was overjoyed: “Actually, I am eyeing this post but was concerned that Feng Qie may beat me to it. This is better than I imagined.”

Xiang Shaolong can never understand all the politics and power grabbing. But he is certain that Li Si will be a powerful official supporting the future Qin Shi Huang so he will definitely enjoy official promotions.

Li Si gratefully thanked: “I owe all my success to Brother Xiang. I do not know what to say to express my heartfelt gratitude.”

Xiang Shaolong humbly replied: “A pearl will shine wherever it is. I am only taking away the cloth that is covering the pearl and Brother Li is such a pearl. It is with your contributions that the Crown Prince will unite the world one day.”

Li Si smiled: “Brother Xiang thinks too highly of me. Since Jiangong started governance, Xiangong started administration, Xiaogong implemented Shang Yang’s reforms and King Huiwen consolidated everything, our Qin state has made significant progress in terms of politics, economy and military. In these turbulent times, we are in the best position to unite the world. The only obstacle is the Crown Prince lack of genuine authority and everything has to be approved by the Empress. When the Crown Prince is coroneted, based on his talents, he will accomplish this impossible task. I am only worthy of carrying his shoes or buttoning up his sleeves! Brother Xiang need not give me

too much credit.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Brother Li has done so much and yet do not seek credit for them. No wonder the Crown Prince has a good opinion of you.”

Finishing his words, he sensed something and turned his head towards the door, discovering Lord Changping and Xiao Pan standing there. Xiao Pan’s eyes were shining and he seems to have overheard Li Si’s words.

Both men were taken aback and frantically kneeled down and paid their respects.

Xiao Pan strode over in large steps, helping Li Si up. Moved, he swore: “Subject Li must not be offended that I came without announcing. Otherwise, I may not have overheard your innermost thoughts. Subject Li only needs to do your best and I will not mistreat you.”

On the other hand, Li Si is sweating profusely. If he had made some negative comments earlier, his future will be ruined.

Leaving the palace with Lord Changping in tow, they were celebrating Li Si’s stroke of good luck. With only a few sentences, he has managed to gain Xiao Pan’s complete confidence. With his knowledge of history, Xiang Shaolong went as far to predict that Xiao Pan the future Qin Shi Huang’s unwavering trust of Li Si may have arisen from these few lines.

Both men rode out of the palace gates and turned into the

main road of Xianyang City. After crossing the moat. On both sides of the roads are the huge residences of various important high ranking officials, members of the Royal Family and top generals. It was a grand and imposing environment.

He could not help but sigh.

Lord Changping commented: “Shaolong has just come back from Chu and should know about their latest developments. The land in the south is rich and fertile, surpassing our Qin farmlands. If not for our conquering of Bashu, there is no way we can compete with them. However, it is also due to their wealth that will be the cause of their downfall.”

Xiang Shaolong was interested in this topic and slowed down the horse speed. He was curious: “Wealth is better than poverty. Why would it be the cause of their downfall?”

Lord Changping lamented: “The abundant lands of Chu provides its people with sea salt, bronze, leather, abalone, bamboo, gold, gemstones, rhinoceros, fruits and cloth. The country is big and the population is limited. There is excess land for farming and excess rivers for fishing. There is no lack of firewood, fresh water or seafood. One can earn a good living with little work as the land is extremely fertile so every crop grows easily. Without any natural calamities, everyone is comfortable and relaxed so they indulge in merry making all day. During war, the soldiers have no will to fight. Their armies may be big but without genuine capabilities. Otherwise, they would have conquered the world long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed with everything Lord Changping mentioned. Li Yuan is indeed a flamboyant character but he is hard-working too. He took the chance to ask about Zhao whom he is the most familiar with. When he was masquerading as Dong Horse Fanatic, he had used the analogy of Northern Horses and Southern Horses to differentiate between Zhao and Chu.

For some reason, Lord Changping is in a great mood and started chatting: "Zhao has a big territory too but most of the land is mountainous. The northern part is near Ling Hu where the people are strong and fierce. Smaller kingdoms like Ding Xiang, Yun Zhong and Wu Yuan are all conquered by Rongdi. The people are good hunters but are weak at farming and business. Regarding the areas near Yuanjing such as Han Xin, Tai Yuan and Shang Dang, there are all occupied by the descendents of many ex-ministers and officials. They spend all their time scheming against one another and seek fame for themselves, leading an extravagant life. For example, the concubines of the Zhao King numbered more than a hundred and they are all dressed in expensive clothes. The aristocrats indulge in wine, meat and women. They may produce the best soldiers on land but they are not able to utilise talented men. In fact, they are jealous of talent; otherwise, Zhao Gua will not replace Lian Po and directly resulted in the loss of the Battle of Changping."

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Lord Changping to have such insight and his opinion of him improved. He praised: "These

words described the essence of Zhao. What about the other states?"

After being praised by Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping is even more spirited: "Yan is situated in the north east and it will mostly made up of poor mountain folks. Only the capital looks decent. We can disregard them. Han is in dire straits and most of the population live in the hills, making it hard to grow crops. If not for Zhao and Wei supporting them, we would have conquered Han a long time ago."

Xiang Shaolong has yet to visit Yan and Han so he does not know the details. But remembering the incident when Han Fei came to Daliang to borrow grain, he was sure that Lord Changping is telling the truth.

Lord Changping continued: "Wei has always been our arch enemy. Once, that year, General Wu Qi fortified themselves west of the river and we lost incalculable battles there. They allied themselves with everyone and limited our eastern expansion plans. From the border to their capital Daliang, the distance is over ten thousand miles and protected by three hundred thousand soldiers. Fortunately, Wei has grown arrogant and incurred the wrath of Handan City and the people of Zhao, inciting widespread anger against them, resulting in the loss of the Battle of Guiling. Even their top general Pang Juan was captured by the enemy. Since that mistake, Wei has declined over the years, resulting in their present circumstances."

Xiang Shaolong remembered the sayings of Zhao: The people

of Wei cannot be trusted. That year, King Anli of Wei sent men into Zhao to attack him while disguised as horse thieves. Wei deserves the retribution of being annihilated in the future.

He nodded: "Lord has analyzed every state in the east except for Qi."

Lord Changping thought for some time and mysteriously asked: "Does Shaolong know what is the favourite pastime of Qi people besides making empty talk?"

Xiang Shaolong responded: "How will I know? Tell me quick!"

Lord Changping laughed: "I may have been promoted to be the Left Premier but lack the bearing so everyone is treating me like a normal friend. Ha! But I like it this way."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is easy to get along and broke out into a wide grin.

Lord Changping divulged: "Currently, the most popular trade in Linzi is loan sharking. The richest loan shark is a shady merchant named Zhong Sunlong. He is even richer than Lu Buwei in the past. I don't think anyone can match his wealth. From this, you can tell how shallow the people of Qi are. The rich spent all their time in singing, dancing, making music or cock-fighting, dog racing. The poor are generally homeless and live from hand to mouth, making up a large portion of the population. Otherwise, based on their seafood trade, salt resources as well as their capable business strategies, how come they were nearly conquered by Yan? If not for the

rise of Tian Dan, Qi will be in trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely professed; “This is called: Talking to a wise man is better than ten years of reading. It is a nice coincidence that we have promoted a talented man like you to be the Left Premier.”

Lord Changping burst out laughing: “Shaolong need not tease me. I don’t know how you did it but sister has been convinced to marry Yang Duanhe instead of Guan Zhongxie. Even if you land a few punches on me, I would accept it gladly.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood the reason for his joyfulness. He was about to say something when chaos broke out. On the roadside, everyone was trying to run away from a commotion. It turns out that there are two groups of swordsmen engaged in a fight.

Lord Changping bellowed: “Surround them!”

The Eighteen Guardians and Lord Changping’s personal escorts hurriedly got down their horses and advanced forward.

The two groups of swordsmen have a huge gap in their strength. One group has thirty odd men while the other group only has five men. What was surprising is that the winning group was the group of five men.

Their might comes from one of the swordsmen whose skill is alarmingly high.

This man is around twenty five years old and is tall and



handsome. When he moves, his footwork is like the wind and his attacks are ruthless. Every time he strikes, either an opposing weapon will be struck away or an injury will be inflicted. There is no way to resist his attacks. Even the larger group of swordsmen were heavily defeated and were trying to run for their lives.

But the group of five swordsmen refused to let them off and were hot behind their heels.

However, they showed mercy in their attacks. No one was killed and only injuries were sustained, causing many fighters to fall down and being unable to climb back up.

As they fought along the street, a line of injured men can be seen as they were struck down.

When Jing Shan and the others arrived in front of them, the five swordsmen angrily sheathe their swords. Although they were confronted by official soldiers, the five men remained defiant.

From the other group of men, there were only several of them left standing. Clustered in a group, their eyes are flaming with hatred as they stared hard at the five swordsmen.

Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping exchanged a glance. Both of them were aghast at what they saw.

Noticing the uniform colour of the larger group, they can be identified as family warriors of Premier Mentor. Who are the five swordsmen who have the audacity to attack the

subordinates of the Premier Mentor?

Assessing the expert swordsman, Lord Changping coldly breathed: "This man's sword skill is almost as good as Guan Zhongxie's."

Xiang Shaolong nodded once and brought his horse forward, barking: "How dare you people fight on the streets? Is there no regard for the law? Report your names!"

The handsome expert swordsman stood as erect as an immovable mountain and had an imposing aura. He bowed slightly towards Xiang Shaolong, showing his disregard for him. Acting as if nothing has happened, he simply replied: "I am Han Jie from the Inner Custodian Residence. Using their status as Premier Mentor's followers, these men tried to force the restaurant singer to drink wine with them. I could not take it lying down so I take it upon myself to teach them a lesson."

Jing Shan and the rest could not bear with his arrogance and wanted to force him to kneel down but after hearing that he is with Lao Ai, they hurriedly swallowed their words.

Lord Changping came up to Xiang Shaolong's side and whispered: "Han Jie is from Han and Lao Ai got to know him when he was in Han. He is the number one swordsman of Han and it seems like he deserved this reputation."

Xiang Shaolong recalled that Xiao Pan did mention his name before. The other man is Ling Qi who is Lao Ai's advisor. Zhu Ji had wanted to promote both of them.

A spokesperson came out from the group of men belonging to the Premier Mentor's Residence. His eyes glowing with poisonous anger; he did not even paid his respects and proudly denied: "Official Xiang and Left Premier, please do not listen to one side of the story. Han Jie is lying. We brothers are just drinking and having fun but these men from the Inner Custodian Residence tried to interfere with our private affairs. We will report this matter to Official Guan and let him judge for us."

Han Jie coldly snorted: "Losers! What audacity! Let's see what you've got!"

He bowed slightly again to Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping before turning around to leave.

Like a bunch of sore losers, the other group proceeded to assist their injured comrades and left with their heads lowered and their fighting spirit gone.

The Guardians and the escorts glanced at one another by the side as neither Xiang Shaolong nor Lord Changping has issued any order.

For the first time, Xiang Shaolong has tasted the arrogance and defiant attitude of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's family warriors. He was powerless though, and can only wait patiently for the day of the Black Dragon sighting.

On the other hand, he was secretly happy. Now, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's disagreement has escalated to a level of irreconcilability.

Finally, he can enjoy some days of peace!

## CHAPTER 4

## Undercover Agents

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE MOON is big and round tonight. Together with his wives, Xiang Shaolong went to the garden to enjoy viewing the moon. Jing Shan and the others set up a campfire and began barbequing good food. They felt like they are in the wilderness.

Xiang Bao'er has already learnt how to walk. His steps are not steady and whenever he falls, everyone is tickled and cheered for him, adding to the lively atmosphere.

Shan Lan, Teng Yi and their son were present too and the

two kids are having a good time.

Sitting in a pavilion, Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong watched the kids playing and were filled with joy and satisfaction. At the same time, they realised that their peaceful gathering was the result of their hard work. It is the same in the past, the same in the present and will also be the same in the future.

Moved, Teng Yi remarked: "Another two nights later will be the duel between you and Guan Zhongxie. That fellow hasn't left his house at all and naturally did not show his face around Drunken Wind Brothel. You can say that he is doing his best to prepare for the fight."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Han Jie and asked: "Second Brother is a Han native and has participated in the military before. Have you heard of this man named Han Jie?"

Teng Yi's eyes flashed with surprise: "How did Third Brother know of such a person?"

Xiang Shaolong told him what happened today. His expression turning serious, Teng Yi explained: "Today, in terms of swordsmanship, there is no one better than Ji Xia (place in Qi) Sword Saint, Mister Wang You (Forget Worries) Grandmaster Cao Quidao. Legend says that his sword skills has reached a godly level and can win without fighting. One of the main reasons Mister Zou is going back to Qi is to see him. Shan Rou is his closed door disciple."

Xiang Shaolong had heard from Zhao Zhi about this legendary man and was curious: "What is his relationship with Han Jie? Is Han Jie also his disciple? Does that make him

Shan Rou's martial brother?"

Teng Yi revealed: "Cao Quidao may have set up a school in Ji Xia but he is extremely strict when accepting disciples. As a result, his students do not exceed a hundred. He once told the King of Qi that among his disciples; only three of them learnt the essence of his skills. Han Jie is one of them and from this; we can conclude that this man is not easy to deal with."

Recalling Han Jie's snobbish attitude and marvellous sword skill, he enquired: "How old is Cao Quidao now?"

Teng Yi responded: "It is rumoured that he does Qi (energy) meditation so he looks much younger than his real age. By the time he becomes famous, I am just a child. By calculating this way, he should be at least sixty years old."

Thinking about the number one swordsman in wuxia novels, Xiang Shaolong's interest is piqued: "How I wish to visit him someday; but Tian Dan will not welcome me."

Teng Yi was humoured: "Seems like you are more interested in Cao Quidao than Han Jie. Cao Quidao is not concerned about the character of his disciples, only their martial arts potential. In Han, Han Jie is a tyrant who terrorizes the streets and kills anyone he fancies just because he is a member of the royal family. Like his buddy Lao Ai, he is a serial rapist too and that is probably why they can click so well. Now that he has come to Qin to depend on Lao Ai, it is likely that he has run out of options and has to leave Han to escape punishment."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "The more evil expert swordsmen there are, my Hundred Battle Sabre will be less lonely. Second Brother, your hands must be itching too."

Teng Yi laughed: "Even if you do not get rid of Guan Zhongxie, these two men will fight it out sooner or later. Guan Zhongxie and Lian Jin's master is Zhao Jianzhai. He once challenged Cao Quidao and lost his little finger in the duel. Since then, both schools are arch enemies."

Xiang Shaolong joked: "Why did he name himself Zhao Jianzhai (abstaining from using the sword)? Isn't it a name that provokes comments?"

Talented Lady Ji's voice sang out: "He is not the first one to use Abstain in his name. Hubby must not underestimate him. After Cao Quidao, he is considered the next best swordsman under the sky. Otherwise, he would not have produced a disciple like Guan Zhongxie."

Xiang Shaolong joked: "There is also someone named Lian Wenzhuo (Drinking mosquito) who has just come to Xianyang City looking for trouble."

Ji Yanran came up to the back of the two men and leaned on Xiang Shaolong's back. Looking up at the bright moon, she softly said: "I am the one whose hands are really itchy. Ever since I married you, you fought all my fights for me. It is so unfair."

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged a look upon hearing her words.



Ji Yanran imagined: “Two nights later and it will be a three way clash between Lu Buwei, Lao Ai and our hubby. The people of Qin values courage and whoever is the winner shall benefit tremendously. At least this is what the common folks will perceive.”

Teng Yi had an inspiration: “It may not be likely but will Lu Buwei take the risk to eliminate everyone who is opposing him? With Meng Ao holding the military seal, they can hold the Crown Prince and Empress hostage. It may cause chaos but it is still a possibility.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned hard and thought for a while, commenting: “Unless they have Wang Ci’s support, otherwise, Lu Buwei will not dare to do it alone. Since the Shang Yang reforms, no one is allowed to have more family warriors than the Imperial Army. As long as the Palace Guards and Imperial Cavalry work hand in hand, Lu Buwei dare not try any tricks. But it is better to play safe. Tomorrow, I will speak to Lord Changping and Wang Ci just in case.”

Ji Yanran insisted: “Hubby must let us come to the banquet too and see how you fight!”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “How would I dare to leave you behind?”

He sighed: “How I wish to make a trip to Qi. I can pay a visit to Shan Rou and can also pit my skills against the best under the sky.”

Teng Yi advised: “You can think all you like but if you really

leave Qin, Lu Buwei will surely know. He may even guess that you are going to Qi to assassinate Tian Dan. Qi will be waiting for you with all sorts of traps and ambushes!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is not joking and shook his head with a smile.

Ji Yanran suddenly recalled: "Lady Qingxiu is here in Qin!"

For a while, Xiang Shaolong had no recollection of her and stared at Ji Yanran with a puzzled expression.

Teng Yi is even more perplexed and asked: "Who is Lady Qingxiu?"

Ji Yanran explained: "Lady Qingxiu is Chu's Great General Dou Jie's wife. As Dou Jie wanted to marry Chen Suning as a concubine, she left in anger and even swore to commit suicide if Dou Jie steps into her residence. Do you remember now?"

Xiang Shaolong was finally enlightened. Lady Qingxiu is Lady Hua Yang's niece. That year, Lady Hua Yang had wanted him to pass something to her but he had failed in his mission.

Teng Yi pondered: "What is she doing here?"

Ji Yanran answered: "It is Li Yanyan who sent her here, hoping to use her close relationship with Lady Hua Yang to resolve the issue over Premier Xu's assassination. At the same time, she can bring Chu's Princess home."

Teng Yi wondered: "Times have changed. Does Lady Hua Yang still have a strong influence over the Qin court?"

Stifling her laughter, Ji Yanran shot Xiang Shaolong a look and smiled: "How can there be no influence? Don't forget that our Grand Tutor Qin is Lady Hua Yang's confidante and she can definitely influence our Commander Xiang. Lady Qingxiu is now staying at Sister Qin's residence. Just now, Sister Qin sent someone to invite her Grand Tutor Xiang to see Lady Qingxiu tomorrow at her place! Hubby, you must not decline!"

Xiang Shaolong was annoyed: "Didn't your Sister Qin tell her that I have tried my best? Crown Prince will not attack Chu."

Teng Yi laughed: "Why are all the names coming up? Your Grand Tutor Qin; your Sister Qin? What is going on?"

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran looked at each other and burst out laughing too.

Before Ji Yanran took her leave, she reminded: "I am not paying any more attention to both of you. If you dare, go ahead and disregard Sister Qin's invitation!"

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong attended morning court.

As usual, Zhu Ji is present and there is nothing abnormal about her. She must have gotten pregnant recently and with the clothes covering up her figure, she is not afraid of being exposed over the next few months.

The officials are busy discussing and analyzing different issues related to the Zhengguo Canal, such as the finances, manpower deployment and the relocation of the affected residents.

Xiang Shaolong had no idea what they were talking about and was completely bewildered. Naturally, he remained silent throughout.

After he endured the entire session, court finally ended and he was dragged to one side by Wang Ci and Wang He. Wang Ci began: "The timing is perfect. After the mourning deadline tomorrow, Xiang Shaolong can bring Little Jun to the Lu Residence and pay your respects to Mister and Missus Lu. You can discuss with them the details regarding the dowry and the wedding ceremonies."

Wang He shuddered: "It is really too coincidental. Lu Gong's mourning period ended exactly on Lu Buwei's birthday."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his own goose pimples rising too.

Wang Ci questioned: "Lord Changping told me that both of you encountered a street brawl between men from the Premier Mentor residence and the Inner Custodian residence. Is it true?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Both groups of men regard us as nothing. How I wish I can slaughter them on the spot."

Wang He swore: "No matter what, we must grab the Imperial Infantry Commander post back to our side. But it won't be easy though."

Wang Ci frowned: "We can talk about this later. Has Shaolong sent out the letter?"

Xiang Shaolong affirmed: "I already sent it out to Chu yesterday."

Wang He cursed: "Lao Ai is now recruiting men and buying horses. He has also sent head hunters to the eastern states to recruit top swordsmen. With the Empress backing him, we do not dare to interfere. This fake eunuch is even more irritating than Lu Buwei. Recently, in order to expand his residence, he forcefully took over the surrounding parcels of land. So infuriating!"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "The Crown Prince needs the support of Empress so we all have to bear with it for the time being."

He happened to see Li Si gesturing to him from afar that Xiao Pan wants to see him. After telling the two men about Teng Yi's guess that Lu Buwei may create some trouble during his birthday celebration, he thanked them and hurriedly went to see Xian Pan.

Besides Xiao Pan, Lord Changping is in the Imperial study too. After Xiang Shaolong and Li Si paid their respects and got seated, Xiao Pan cheerfully started: "I want to introduce someone to you."

All the three men were stunned.

Xiao Pan sent his order and someone came into the study almost immediately. He paid his respects to Xiao Pan.

After he stood up again, Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at him. This man is around forty years old with a long body and a thick beard. He looks intelligent and scholarly.

Xiao Pan politely invited: "Mister, please have a seat."

While everyone is still kept in the dark, Xiao Pan began

introducing everyone and explained: "This is the famous advisor Mister Mao Jiao from Qi, Jia Xia. Lao Ai sent someone to invite him to Xianyang City. I shall let Mister Mao explain to you the reason why he came all the way here."

Mao Jiao plainly smiled: "I came here without any ill intentions. I wanted to check out the might of Qin personally and want to know why the Eastern States are so fearful of it."

Li Si grew excited: "What does Mister think?"

Mao Jiao coldly state: "The Crown Prince and I chatted for half a day. Our common conclusion is this: Without eliminating Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, Qin can never unite the World."

Xiao Pan laughed: "I had wanted to give Mister an official post but after thinking further, I thought that it would be better if Mister can work under Lao Ai and be my spy. I have to thank Mister for agreeing so readily."

Xiang Shaolong is full of praise. At Lu Buwei's side, he has Tu Xian spying for him. If they have this cunning and intelligent Mao Jiao undercover too, Lao Ai will be doomed for sure.

At the same time, he can see that Xiao Pan is maturing as the days go by. Now, he knows how to use spies to his advantage.

Li Si and Lord Changping slapped their armrests in praise.

After discussing their plans and future communication

methods, Mao Jiao left.

Xiang Shaolong remembered Meng Wu and Meng Tian's issue and brought it up, swearing their loyalty to the Crown Prince.

Since young, Xiao Pan has been sparring with them and knows them well. With Xiang Shaolong's guarantee, he fully trusts them. But after thinking for some time, he still cannot come up with suitable posts for them.

Xiang Shaolong had a realization: "When I kill Guan Zhongxie tomorrow night, the Imperial Infantry Commander post will be vacant. No matter whom we propose, Lu Buwei will object and even Lao Ai would not want all three armies to fall under our jurisdiction. Only by choosing Meng Wu or Meng Tian will there be no objection. The other brother can follow his father to battle and keep us informed of any updates. This way, we are invincible."

This time, it is Xiao Pan's turn to slap the armrest in praise. To Lord Changping, he ordered: "Left Premier, try to arrange the two brothers to see me. Let me encourage them personally and assure their conviction."

Just as he was leaving the palace, Xiang Shaolong recalled Lady Qingxiu's appointment and quickly rushed towards Qin Residence.

Qin Qing and Lady Qingxiu were chatting in the hall. Seeing that he appeared as summoned, Qin Qing joyfully introduced them to each other.

Lady Qingxiu is wearing Xiang Shaolong's favourite Chu dress with wide sleeves and intricate embroidery. The most attractive ornament is her jewelled belt that is shimmering with numerous precious gemstones.

It may be due to Xiang Shaolong abrupt appearance that Lady Qingxiu did not have her veil on, letting Xiang Shaolong view her fine features.

Probably due to her marital woes, she looks slightly unhealthy. However, it did not affect her graceful disposition which separates her from other women.

Her eyes are shining with intelligence and self-respect, making others respects her too.

After he got seated, using her melodious voice, Lady Qingxiu uttered some polite words of courtesy before gratefully thanking: "Grand Tutor Qin has told me everything. Luckily, we have Official Xiang helping us to put in a good word in front of Crown Prince and prevented a war between Qin and Chu. On behalf of my country, I sincere express my thanks to Official Xiang for treasuring our friendship."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling funny inside. He thought that since this is the case, why did you still want to see me? Of course he put on a normal expression.

Lady Qingxiu plainly asked: "In actual fact, we have met before, right?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this is a top secret. Is it Li Yanyan or Li Yuan who told her this big secret? He was



shocked: "What makes Lady say this?"

As unassuming and unmoved as ever, Lady Qingxiu replied: "Besides expressing my thanks personally, I asked to see Official Xiang because I have to give you two presents. They are from Empress Dowager Li Yanyan and Lady Xiu'er (Guo Xiu'er). I heard from Grand Tutor Qin that you came back from Shouchun recently. Now that I have seen you personally, I can recognize you."

Feeling extremely awkward, Xiang Shaolong stole a peep at Qin Qing. Fortunately, she only batted an eye at him and did not blame him for flirting with other women. Composed, he admitted: "Since Lady has recognised me, how can I deny any further. Hei! Lady has sharp observation skills. That day, you did not even look at me in the eye but yet you still manage to recognize me."

Lady Qingxiu smiled slightly and gestured to her attendant. Two exquisite boxes were presented and she explained: "Before I left, Empress Dowager summoned me to the palace and specially instructed that no one else must know about this. I hope Official Xiang understands."

Due to Li Yanyan and Guo Xiu'er special status, they can only conceal their feelings for him deep inside their hearts, making him feel even more melancholic. Discovering that the two girls in front of him are scrutinizing his reaction, he frantically changed the topic: "How is Chancellor Li doing?"

Lady Qingxiu seems to be unwilling to talk about Li Yuan. She simply brushed off: "He is well. If you have the time, feel

free to visit him in Shouchun. He will treat you with utmost sincerity.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot find any more conversation topics with this nonchalant and icy beauty. He tried ending the interview: “When is Lady leaving for Chu?”

Lady Qingxiu replied: “After meeting Empress Zhu Ji tonight, I will leave for Chu tomorrow. I am not used to the climate here. I know that Official Xiang has important things to see to and will not hold you back any longer.”

Xiang Shaolong is won over by her diplomacy and tact. After winking secretly at Qin Qing, he turned around and left.

## CHAPTER 5

## The Day Before The Fight

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

CARRYING the two boxes, Xiang Shaolong returned to the Command Centre. In his own room, he opened them up and discovered two well-embroidered gowns inside. His heart is filled with warmth.

In this male dominant society, it is not easy for woman to achieve true happiness. Guo Xiu'er and Li Yanyan are two good examples. Despite their regal status, they cannot pursue what their hearts truly desire.

Their fates are still in the hands of men.

Filled with immeasurable emotions, he was distracted by an attendant sent by Teng Yi to summon him.

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and went to the main hall.

Teng Yi reported: "Another conflict has occurred. Some men from the Weinan Martial Arts School are shipping some weapons into the City and were stopped at the gates by the guards. A dispute broke out and the head guard was injured. The men were detained by Guan Zhongxie but Lao Ai showed up personally and Guan Zhongxie had to release the men. Seems like Lu Buwei is also tolerating Lao Ai's antics."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "I want to see how far he can tolerate. Right! Help me inform Little Jun that his marriage to Lu Dan'er shouldn't be much of an issue. After my duel, we can officially seek her hand in marriage."

Teng Yi was overjoyed and hurriedly sent someone to inform Jing Jun.

Xiang Shaolong advised: "With Lu Dan'er as his wife, he should be satisfied. Second Brother must watch him carefully and not let him visit the brothels anymore. Presently, Xianyang City is a dangerous place with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai fighting it out. We better not get involved."

Teng Yi bitterly laughed: "I have spoken to him countless times but this kid loves to flirt, socialize and entertain. If you really want him to stay in the house, we have to resort to breaking both his legs."

Xiang Shaolong sighed.

Jing Jun will get into trouble later but as long as he is not injured or killed, Xiang Shaolong can still bear with him. He nodded: "Since this is the case, let's get more men to escort him. If he runs into a fight, at least he is not out-numbered."

Teng Yi reasoned: "If he becomes the son-in-law of the Lu family, his status will be greatly elevated. Lu Gong has tremendous influence over many civil officials and military leaders. Everyone will have to give him face. After his marriage, anyone would have to think twice before provoking him."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that if Lu Gong is still alive, he may oppose this marriage as Jing Jun is not a Qin native.

Teng Yi continued: "As long as Jing Jun doesn't step into Drunken Wind Brothel, everything should be fine. Currently, Lao Ai and Lu Buwei are indirectly using Drunken Wind Brothel as their contending ground. Poor Wu Fu."

Xiang Shaolong thought of the complicated relationship between Dan Meimei and Lao Ai.

After Qin Qing and Ji Yanran, Dan Meimei is next in terms of beauty. She is prettier than Ying Ying, Lu Dan'er, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi. Even if Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are absent, other men will try their best to secure her for their private pleasure.

Somehow, he did not have the least bit of affection for her. It may be due to his experience with Zhao Ya, Lady Pingyuan and Empress Jing that he has a fear of beauties who lie with their eyes wide open.

Teng Yi slapped his forehead: "I nearly forgot to tell you something. Housekeeper Tu wanted to meet you at the old place at the 'jia' hour. I am sure he has something important to tell you."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "I think Lu Buwei is really going to rebel."

Two hours later, Xiang Shaolong and Tu Xian met up again at their secret spot. Tu Xian's hair is turning grey since they met two months ago. He must have been working under high amounts of stress.

After both men got seated, Tu Xian raised his thumb: "Shaolong is a genius to make Meng Ao and Lu Buwei suffer a tragic loss. Meng Ao is especially embarrassed but Lu Buwei dare not blame him. With this defeat, their plans are in disarray."

Xiang Shaolong knew that his guess is correct. Lu Buwei is a temperamental person and patience is not one of his virtues. He would not stand by and watch Xiao Pan grow in power each day. He joked: "Is he ready to rebel?"

Tu Xian coldly smiled: "He is not capable of rebelling yet but he knows how to wrest power from others. Originally, he has two parts (Meng Ao & Wang Ci) of the military supporting him. With your death, Lao Ai the fake eunuch can only do so much and Wang Jian cum An Gu are too far away to be of assistance. But he just cannot get rid of you and now, Wang Ci has deflected to your side. Last night, he blew his top and cursed you and Wang Ci nonstop in front of Guan Zhongxie

and Meng Ao. This man is without a conscience and has never reflected on all the horrendous crimes that he has committed.”

Xiang Shaolong thought of something and questioned: “Did Wang Ci tell Lu Buwei about the blood test Lu Gong did on Crown Prince? The one that proved Crown Prince is not related to Lu Buwei?”

This is the first time Tu Xian heard about the blood test. After hearing the details, his face changed colour: “Shaolong, you are mad. Even I dare not gamble that Crown Prince is the son of Lu Buwei or not. If he is indeed Lu Buwei’s son, wouldn’t all the hard work go down the drain?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong will not tell him the truth. He sighed: “If I appear hesitant, Lu Gong and the rest will begin to suspect that Crown Prince is that traitor’s bastard child, right? I am also glad we placed a right bet this time.”

Still fearful, Tu Xian took some time to compose himself before commenting: “I am sure Wang Ci did not tell Lu Buwei about this matter. Every time he got into trouble, he will curse Zhu Ji. He hates Zhu Ji for not telling Crown Prince the truth about him being his real father. It is really strange. With Lu Buwei’s intelligence, how can he make such a mistake? When he gave Zhu Ji away, he had the intention to make his own son the King of Qin... How can there be a mistake? In the past, he did tell me once that the Crown Prince is his own flesh and blood.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot help but asked: “But Zhu Ji told me

personally that even she cannot be sure whether the Crown Prince is Lu Buwei's son or King Zhuangxiang's son."

Tu Xian lamented: "Even if she knew, this ambitious woman will not tell the truth. If the Crown Prince is still close to her, she will not rely on Lao Ai. At the end of the day, it is just a fight for power."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken as he had never thought of Zhu Ji this way.

If someone else said these words, he would not pay any attention but Tu Xian knew her all the way back when she is still a courtesan in Lu Buwei's residence.

The 'Ji' is Zhu Ji refers to her profession, which is courtesan.

When King Zhuangxiang is in power, she behaved herself well, knowing that she can enjoy wealth and power. Moreover, her own son is the future King of Qin so she has nothing more to ask for.

When Lu Buwei murdered King Zhuangxiang, she saw through him and did not want to depend on him alone. She tried to win Xiang Shaolong to her side but discovered that he is loyal to Xiao Pan and the late King so she got together with Lao Ai. First, she can satisfy her sexual needs and second, she can cultivate her authority through him.

Recently, she found out that her son is really holding different views so she hardened her heart and submitted wholeheartedly to Lao Ai and even become pregnant for him. Ultimately, she refuses to give up her authority.



After analyzing things from this angle, Xiang Shaolong can feel his burden lightening and his guilt towards Zhu Ji lessened greatly.

His mood improving, he enquired: "What does Lu Buwei plan to do now?"

Tu Xian revealed: "As long as you are around, Lu Buwei dare not let his guard down. With Wang Ci supporting you and Crown Prince, Meng Ao does not have the confidence to do anything too. If there comes a day when both Wang Ci and Meng Ao are out at war, we should be extra careful. Meng Ao possesses the military seal and can come back anytime. With Lu Buwei's eight thousand family warriors, they can find any excuse and kill whoever that opposes them. I think Shaolong knows this better than me."

Xiang Shaolong nodded with a smile.

Tu Xian continued; "At the present moment, Lu Buwei and Meng Ao are pining all their hopes on the duel tomorrow night. If Guan Zhongxie manages to win, you will be killed for sure. Shaolong must think twice before you act."

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "The bigger the hopes, the bigger the disappointment."

Still worried for him, Tu Xian sighed: "Excuse me for being frank. For the past six months, Guan Zhongxie has been practising nonstop. He is at his peak regardless of sword skills or fitness. Shaolong need not gamble your life with him. The impact of this duel is bigger than you imagine."

Xiang Shaolong is aware of his true concern for him. Grabbing his shoulders, he promised: "Please have confidence in me. You will enjoy a good show tomorrow."

He took the chance to ask: "How is Third Mistress doing?"

Tu Xian sighed: "Within the Premier Mentor Residence, she is the only person I care for. She treats me better than the others. Unfortunately, she is the daughter of that traitor. These few days, she has been worrying a lot. I can see that she prefers Guan Zhongxie over you. Initially, I thought that she had really wanted both of you to fight again but recently, I learnt that it is Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie's conspiracy. During the hunting fair, you may seemed to have gain the upper hand but privately, Guan Zhongxie insisted that he did not wish to kill you so he let you off that night. Otherwise, you would have lost for sure. Hei! That is why I have tried many times to persuade you not to fight if you can help it."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "Honestly speaking, that day, I did not show my true prowess so Guan Zhongxie managed to survive. Tomorrow, I will give it my best shot."

Tu Xian was astonished; "Really?"

To comfort him, Xiang Shaolong sprouted nonsense: "Of course! Otherwise, why did I only defend and not attack during the second round?"

Tu Xian eyed him suspiciously before adding: "Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are in an arms race now. Both of them are recruiting talented men all over the states to be added to their army of

family warriors. Besides absorbing the Weinan Martial Arts School, Lao Ai managed to recruit this man named Han Jie. This man is rumoured to have learnt the essence of Ji Xia Sword Saint Cao Quidao's sword skills and even Guan Zhongxie considers him to be a significant threat. Shaolong must be careful when dealing with this man. He is a top assassin and several high ranking officials of Qi have fallen under his sword."

Xiang Shaolong has seen how Han Jie fights and admits that he is capable of contending with Guan Zhongxie.

Tu Xian revealed: "Among Lu Buwei's latest recruits, the most outstanding ones are Xu Shang, Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu. Xu Shang is the best swordsman among them and is now Guan Zhongxie's sparring partner. His skill is not far from Guan Zhongxie's level, only losing to him in terms of arm strength. However, his sword skill is very creative and agile which covers up this weakness. Lu Buwei has the intention to make him the Assistant Imperial Infantry Commander."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Lu Buwei can plan all he wants but let's see if they can come into fruit. Right! Any news from Xiao Yuetan?"

Tu Xian cheerfully divulged: "A talent is a talent wherever he goes. Yuetan is now named Biantan and is recognized for his abilities. At present, he is serving the Chancellor of Han. I am happy for him."

After further discussion, they parted.

That night, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun the three

brothers are having dinner at the Command Centre. Knowing that his marriage is secured, Jing Jun is especially happy and proud.

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to advise: "If there is nothing important, do not go to Drunken Wind Brothel. Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are fighting over Dan Meimei and we should not get involved in their fight."

Jing Jun was stunned and awkwardly confessed: "Coincidentally, Lord Changwen has an appointment with me to go there for drinks tonight. Yang Yu and Bailei will be accompanying us. Ai! I will tolerate everything and I guarantee I will not get into trouble."

Teng Yi scolded: "You can refrain from provoking others but won't others provoke you? Don't forget that you defeated Zhou Zihen during the hunting fair. Because of this, every follower of Lu Buwei bore grudges against you and will do their best to make things difficult for you. With Guoxin and the rest also against you and with Lao Ai supporting them, you must understand that you are still alive because of your Assistant Imperial Cavalry Commander Post. Otherwise, you would have been mincemeat long ago. Up till now you still have no idea how foolish you are."

Jing Jun dare not speak back to Teng Yi and looked pleadingly at Xiang Shaolong.

Seeing that he is still young and immature, Xiang Shaolong's heart softened. He suggested: "Since we are quite free, why don't we all join in the fun and see what is really going on?"

Teng Yi was petrified: "Third Brother must not forget your duel tomorrow night. If you went out merry making tonight; will Yanran and the rest forgive you?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "I want to intentionally let Guan Zhongxie know that I am not bothered by the duel tomorrow. This will make him complacent and think that he will win for sure. As long as we bring Little Jun back home early, there shouldn't be any problem. Otherwise, I cannot get to sleep worrying about this brat."

Jing Jun was touched: "Third Brother treats me the best. No! Second Brother treats me well too."

Following that, he jumped up and exclaimed: "I must look for Lord Changping. If all of us are going but we leave him out, he will hold it against me."

Looking at Jing Jun sprinting away, both men can only smile bitterly.

After talking for some time, Xiang Shaolong sent someone to inform his wives that he will be back home late. Just as they were about to leave, Huan Yi showed up.

This young and capable general has tiredness written all over his face but looks more cheerful than before. It must be due to the fact that he can finally put his talents to good use.

Seeing the two men, Huan Yi knelt down immediately.

Both men hurriedly helped him up.

Teng Yi was surprised: "Little Yi, why are you not busy

training the new army? Did you travel throughout the night to Xianyang City?"

Huan Yi replied: "With Wang Ben managing them, there is nothing to worry about. It is my top priority to come back and cheer for Official Xiang's duel tomorrow. Ai! I spent many hours before finally convincing Wang Ben to stay behind. I came back with Left Premier's permission so I did not break any rules.'

Teng Yi laughed: "I see. I heard that there are many people like you who have come a long way from where they are in order to take part in the birthday celebration tomorrow."

Huan Yi informed: "On my way, I ran into Po Hu from Tunliu. His entourage is amazing, with over five hundred family warriors and a large group of courtesans. But I do not like this man at all."

Lord Changping's voice sounded out: "I do not like this man too. Great minds do think alike."

The three men are talking at the main gate. Turning around, they saw Lord Changping and Li Si coming towards them. The number of their armed escorts is three times larger than usual.

Huan Yi dared not be as friendly towards Lord Changping compared to Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi. He quickly paid his respects and kept quiet.

After the usual pleasantries, Li Si sighed: "Thinking about your duel tomorrow, the Crown Prince and I are not in the

mood to work. Suddenly, Little Jun came to look for Lord Changping, saying that all of you are going to Drunken Wind Brothel to have a pre-celebration for tomorrow's victory. I am bored to death so I thought I come along too."

He whispered: "The Crown Prince is here too!"

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Huan Yi were blown away. Looking towards the group of riders, they finally spotted Xiao Pan between Jing Jun and Lord Changping. This future Qin Shi Huang has put on a fake moustache and dressed in a normal warrior clothes, nodding and smiling at them.

Before Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi can react, Huan Yi had already kneeled down and tried to kowtow. Lord Changping dragged him up and hissed: "Crown Prince has strict orders that no one must pay respects to him. This is to hide his identity. Violators will be severely punished."

Huan Yi frantically stood up.

Reining his horse, Xiao Pan laughed: "It is getting late. Let's make a move."

Xiang Shaolong and the rest quickly mounted their horses and accompanied Xiao Pan towards the lighted streets and Drunken Wind Brothel.

Only Xiang Shaolong dared to ride side by side Xiao Pan.

In a great mood, Xiao Pan joked: "Will Master blame me for fooling around despite being the Crown Prince?"

Not wanting to spoil his mood, Xiang Shaolong laughed:

“Even if you are King, you should also find time to relax.”

Xiao Pan is only afraid of him. Since he has given the green light, he teased: “When I heard that Master is going merry making on the day before the duel, I have nothing but admiration for you. That is the sign of a true hero. Empress summoned me earlier and wanted me to stop this fight, saying that your chances of winning are not high. Hng! In this world, only I know that Master is invincible.”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that Xiao Pan has hero-worshipped himself since young. His invincible image has been deeply imprinted in his mind and nobody can alter this. Luckily, he created the Hundred Battle Sabre and the Hundred Battle Sabre Play. Otherwise, he will be feeling very stressed now. He simply replied: “Looks like Crown... Hei... What should I call you instead? Otherwise, your identity may be leaked.”

Enthusiastically looking at the normal houses and passersby, Xiao Pan easily replied: “Call me Qin Shi! Qin is my country and Master mentioned that I will be the Qin Shi Huang who will unite the world. All right. Call me Qin Shi. This is such a nice name.”

While Xiang Shaolong was stunned at this development, Xiao Pan summoned Lord Changping and got him to notify everyone of his new name.

Turning back to him, Xiao Pan asked: “What did Master want to say?”

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the incredulous feeling he had



upon hearing the two words: Qin Shi. He thought for a while and remembered his earlier question: "I wanted to ask if you will be going to Lu Buwei's banquet tomorrow."

Xiao Pan was puzzled: "Do you need to ask this question? How I wish tonight is tomorrow night! Empress will be there too. Nobody in Xianyang City will give this fight a miss. I heard that there are many people who are gambling on the results of the duel. Hng! According to Lord Changwen's report, most people believe that Guan Zhongxie is well prepared and has a higher chance of winning but I know that the resulting victor will be Master."

Xiang Shaolong was tickled, thinking that gambling is already so widespread now. Perhaps it is just a basic human nature to try their luck.

With the large signboard of Drunken Wind Brothel in sight, Xiao Pan became even more excited and updated: "The Po Hu fellow whom Huan Yi mentioned is Tunliu's richest man. It is often said that he is the second richest man in Qin after your Wu Family. He specializes in salt and iron business and his business is very successful. This man is very ambitious and used to work with Lord Yangquan. Now, he is quite intimate with Du Bi. We must be careful of this man."

Lord Changping rode forward and enquired: "Crown... Hei! No! Brother Qin, are we going to a quiet spot of our own or are we going to the main hall to participate in the rowdiness?"

Xiao Pan naturally replied: "Of course we are going to the

main hall. I even wanted to see the four top beauties. I want to personally see how beautiful they are that so many men have fallen head over heels over them. ”

With these words, Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping exchanged a look, thinking that there is no way to stay low profile tonight.

## CHAPTER 6

*Assembly of Talents*

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

DRUNKEN WIND BROTHEL is especially crowded tonight. At the front door, the line of carriages stretches for some distance and people need to queue to enter it.

After discussing with Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong decided to bring only the Eighteen Guardians and another eighteen of the best Palace Guards inside the brothel. This is to prevent others from seeing their true strength and guessing that something is amiss.

After passing through the high wall surrounding the brothel,

this future Qin Shi Huang was elated at seeing the well lit main building, isolated halls and pavilions. He pointed everywhere excitedly and was in a great mood.

Incidentally, on the other side of a pavilion, there are courtesans and their clients lighting fireworks, making the night sky bright and beautiful. It was a scenic and lively atmosphere.

Brothel Owner Wu Fu is at the main door welcoming the guests. When he caught sight of Lord Changping and Xiang Shaolong's group, however occupied he is, he still excruciate himself from his position and went forward, welcoming: "Successful people don't bear small grudges. I may have been dishonest in the past but I don't have a choice too. Will Left Premier, Official Xiang and other officials please forgive me."

Xiang Shaolong can only swallow his grudge bitterly. Wu Fu has made such an honest and upfront confession; how can he continue to make things difficult for him?

Ten over maids came up to them and amidst their joyful laughter; they helped everyone take off their winter cloaks and presented hot towels for refreshing themselves. The service here is one of the best.

Since he is temporary free, Wu Fu paid his respects to everyone.

He is amazingly knowledgeable about the influential people of Qin. When he heard Li Si and Huan Yi's names, he bowed respectfully and even managed to bring up some related

conversational topics.

When Xiang Shaolong introduced 'Qin Shi', Wu Fu was stunned and could not recollect such a person. But since this person can hang around Xiang Shaolong and Lord Changping plus the fact that everyone is very polite to him, he must be someone important too. Moreover, this person looks neither young nor old. With a square face and large ears, he may not be handsome but carries an air of dominance. When this person stares at himself, Wu Fu can feel the urge to kneel down and pay his respects. He dared not be rude and respectfully greeted: "Official Qin looks imposing and is a rare breed among men. In the future, you must treat me well."

It was a timely flatter. Xiao Pan initially did not have a good opinion of him but after hearing these praises, he laughed: "Brothel Owner Wu is too polite. Ha! I travelled a long way here to visit Drunken Wind Brothel and see the four beauties. Please make the necessary arrangements."

They were speaking at the reception area. As Xiang Shaolong is here with a big group and with the eighteen Guardians and eighteen palace guards fanning out in a bodyguard formation, they have occupied half of the reception area.

Other incoming guests noticed Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping and other influential officials so they automatically took a detour around them. Only a group of sturdy warriors was irritated at Wu Fu's attention at Xiang Shaolong's group. They stopped where they are with an ugly

expression on their faces.

The Guardians are quite sensible and stayed immobile. However, the palace guards are used to serving the Crown Prince and could not take it lying down. They stared back at the warriors with hostility.

Wu Fu heard Xiao Pan's request and his face changed colour. But Xiao Pan has an aura of dominance that makes it impossible for anyone to reject him. Wu Fu hurriedly replied: "This is a little challenging. Let me try my best to arrange for them to spend some time with you."

Jing Jun glanced once at the warriors and was overjoyed. Leaning towards Xiang Shaolong, he whispered: "Scarface Guoxin is here and so is Chang Jie. Ha! They must be tired of living. How dare they compete with the Crown Prince for Wu Fu's attention."

Xiang Shaolong turned around and recognized Guoxin first. Of course, he is the easiest to recognize because of the scars over his face and forehead. Guoxin is more well-built than the ordinary person and has an air of seriousness. With one look, one can tell that he is not a common person. He may not be considered good looking but he reeks of manly charm.

Guoxin and the rest appeared to have recognized Xiang Shaolong too. They were surprised to see him but stared back at him without fear.

Xiao Pan can sense them staring at himself too. Turning around, he saw Guoxin and his fellow warriors staring

arrogantly at him. He coldly hissed: "Who are these men?"

Lord Changping quickly and respectfully reported: "They are from Weinan Martial Arts School. The group there is headed by Head Instructors Guoxin and Chang Jie."

Wu Fu has never seen Lord Changping speaking at anyone so respectfully before. His eyes lit up with fear.

Xiao Pan is about to arrest them when Xiang Shaolong gently reminded: "We are here to have fun!"

Xiao Pan acknowledged his reminder and laughed: "Right! Right! Let's have fun tonight!"

Before he can take a step, someone at the door announced: "Tunliu Master Po is here!"

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan and everyone stopped moving and turned around, looking towards the door.

Twelve imposing warriors dressed in a uniform warrior suit first paved the way and behind them is a middle aged man with a tall hat. He is taller than most individuals by a head and is almost as tall as Xiang Shaolong. With his wide and exquisite gown, he exudes an aristocratic aura.

His eyes are the most striking. After he scanned the entire area, he looks confident and assured.

He did not resemble a merchant at all but more like a scholar. He is slightly arrogant and could not be bothered with Chunhua and the maids who are attending to him.

Besides him are two warriors dressed in elaborate warrior

suits. From one glance, one can tell that both are expert swordsmen.

Wu Fu was in a dilemma. Po Hu is a famous tycoon from eastern Qin. He did not know who to attend to. Moreover, Guoxin and his group are showing signs of impatience.

Xiang Shaolong can see his dilemma and smiled: "Brothel Owner Wu can attend to your guests. We can go upstairs on our own."

Under the sky, only Xiang Shaolong dares to say these words. If it was Lord Changping, he will never have the guts to tell Wu Fu to abandon the Crown Prince and serve other guests.

Wu Fu was extremely grateful and bowed as he retreated. Meanwhile, he gestured for another helper to lead Xiang Shaolong's group upstairs.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest walked towards the inner part of the main building. Just as they were about to climb the stairs, Guoxin stepped out and chased after them. He hollered: "Please hold your step!"

Xiao Pan's eyes flashed with a killing glint and halted. Xiang Shaolong patted him lightly, hinting to him to control his anger before turning around with the rest and faced Guoxin who is approaching them.

The bodyguards fanned out to prevent him from getting too close.

Away from them, Wu Fu is attending to Po Hu.



Guoxin greeted: "I hereby wishes Official Xiang a victorious fight tomorrow night."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is just being polite before saying his true intention. He coldly questioned: "What can I do for you?"

Eyeing the guards in front of him, Guoxin's anger subsided before it shows on his face. He invited: "Everyone in our martial arts school admires your sword skills. If you are free, please make a trip to our school and give us some pointers."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this is as good as challenging him to a duel. He wonders if this is Lao Ai's idea or Weinan Martial Arts School founder Qiu Risheng's idea.

Lord Changping and the rest snorted coldly, expressing their displeasure.

Scarface Guoxin did not exhibit the least fear and did not frown the least bit. He stood there firmly, awaiting Xiang Shaolong's reply.

Xiang Shaolong simply smiled: "Your School has always been very concerned about my affairs. I have always wanted to see how good you are. Let's see! Over the next few days, when I happen to be in a bad mood, I will definitely make a trip to exchange pointers!"

Guoxin was incensed to hear Xiang Shaolong's merciless words. Just as his eyes shone with cold murderous energy, Xiao Pan clapped: "Well said! When that happens, Official Xiang must bring me along."

Guoxin stared at Xiao Pan with shock. Not knowing his real identity, he barked: "Who are you?"

JIANG!

The eighteen Palace Guards drew their swords simultaneously but only one sound is heard. These men protecting the Crown Prince are not only highly-skilled but well trained too.

One of the guards coldly ordered: "How are you be rude to Master. Kneel down at once!"

The martial arts school warriors saw that something is wrong and hurriedly dashed forward, protecting Guoxin. They understood that almost every person in Xiang Shaolong's group is not to be trifled with and for some time, there is a stalemate.

Po Hu and Wu Fu looked over in astonishment.

Xiang Shaolong laughed heartily: "Brother Qin, we need not waste our time with these clowns. Let's have fun instead."

Ignoring Guoxin and his warriors whose faces have completely darkened, he led Xiao Pan upstairs.

Concurrently, he was laughing inside. In a way, he has saved Guoxin's life. Otherwise, even if Lao Ai or Zhu Ji is here personally, Guoxin and his group will still be executed.

As they stepped into the wide hall on the second floor, it seems like everyone present has already known that Xiang Shaolong is here and the entire hall is very solemn. Everyone

is looking at this man who will be duelling with Guan Zhongxie tomorrow night.

Xiao Pan is afraid to be recognized and walked behind the others. Teng Yi and Huan Yi walked in front of him, preventing others from taking a close look at him.

Yang Duanhe and Bai Chong are waiting for them already. Before they saw Xiao Pan, they welcomed: "Rare guest."

If it was anyone else who is about to fight a formidable opponent like Guan Zhongxie tomorrow, he will be at home practising instead of coming to a brothel.

Jing Jun rushed forward and whispered to them that the Crown Prince is here. He warned them not to kneel or pay respects. Both men have uncontrollable fear and shock written all over their faces. Lost, they fumbled on the spot.

Their table is situated on one side of the hall besides the window. There are ten seats altogether. Xiao Pan smilingly greeted the two generals and sat down with his back to the hall so as to prevent others from seeing his face.

Everyone got seated too.

Tonight is especially crowded and there are no empty seats. Moreover, no one anticipated Xiao Pan will come along too. The thirty six guards have to remain standing. Fortunately, the hall is quite spacious. As instructed by Wu Fu earlier, Chunhua and the other staff quickly set up another two tables by the side. After some disruption, the lively atmosphere resumed.

Maids dressed in beautiful costumes approached their table and begin filling up their wine cups.

After he ordered some dishes, Xiao Pan smiled: "Fellow brothers, please chat and joke as per normal."

Despite his words, nobody dared to even breathe loudly. It was slightly awkward.

Xiang Shaolong broke the ice by smiling: "General Yang and General Bai have been here for some time. Why didn't you get some girls to accompany you?"

Yang Duanhe gave a dry cough and replied with discomfort: "Before Official Xiang came up, everyone here was talking about the big fight tomorrow. There was a huge debate and we were so absorbed we forgot all about the girls."

Bai Chong lowered his head and dared not face Xiao Pan. He replied in a low voice: "When someone reported that you are at the reception area, there was an uproar. Some said that you are confident of victory while some said that you have no self... Hei... No self... Ai! I shall not say anymore. Anyway, no one dares to say anything now."

Teng Yi laughed: "No self respect?"

Bai Chong nodded embarrassedly.

Xiang Shaolong is scanning the hall and noticed several familiar figures. At one table are the expert swordsmen from Premier Mentor Residence. Except for Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan, the newcomers Xu Shang, Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu are all present. Amazingly, Tu Xian is accompanying them.

Xu Shang, Zhao Pu and Tu Xian saw Xiang Shaolong looking at them and gestured back with a smile. However, Zhou Zihen, Lu Chan the two old birds as well as Lian Jian's martial brother Lian Jiao are showing signs of displeasure.

They each have a lady companion but none of them are as top notched as the four beauties Dan Meimei, Yang Yu, Guiyan and Bailei.

Three tables away is a table belonging to Lao Ai's men. Except for the handsome but arrogant Han Jie, there are another two men. Jing Jun pointed out that they are Lao Si, Lao Ai's clansman and Ling Qi, Lao Ai's advisor.

Lao Si's appearance differs greatly from Lao Ai. He is short and fat but his eyes are moving energetically, betraying his cunningness and intelligence.

Ling Qi is smart looking with an elegant and graceful disposition. He looks like a typical advisor.

Guoxin and his men came up to the second floor and joined their table.

Xiao Pan secretly looked around the hall and chanced upon a table of high ranking officials. Normally, they put on a serious demeanour with plenty of self-respect and integrity but now, they are hugging courtesans and cracking silly jokes. Amused, he proclaimed: "Gentlemen, please feel free to pick any girls and drink to your heart's content. Do not let me affect your mood."

Even the playboy Jing Jun can only smile in return. With Xiao

Pan around, even breathing normally is a challenge; how could he summon a female companion? Worse still, a foolish girl may unwittingly expose his flirting secrets and create a big headache for him.

Wu Fu came upstairs too at this point in time and he is personally escorting Po Hu to one of the isolated halls. Along the way, he greeted everyone. Passing by Xiang Shaolong's table, he respectfully reported: "Miss Yang Yu will come after finishing her song. When she heard that Official Xiang is here, she forgot all her other engagements."

Spending his energy in hating such a despicable cad is a waste of his time and effort. Forgiving his past mistake, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Our main guest tonight is this Mister Qin who has come from afar. Yang Yu will accompany him, not me."

Having gone too far in his flattery, Wu Fu laughed: "Official can put your mind at ease. I have already informed Meimei, Little Lei (Bailei) and Yanyan (Guiyan, not Li Yanyan). They will come as soon as they can afford the time. By then, you can punish them by asking them to sing or drink."

Wu Fu lives up to his reputation of handling difficult clients and questions. No one can hold it against him after his eloquent answer.

A cold snort was heard from Guoxin's table and someone coldly remarked: "It is really different if you are holding an official appointment. No matter how busy the beauties are, they will still make time for you."

These words are meant for Xiang Shaolong's table and everyone's countenance changed upon hearing it. It seems like Lao Ai's men are really much more arrogant and detestable compared to Lu Buwei's men.

Everyone in Xiang Shaolong's table is someone of considerable influence. Moreover, Lord Changping is the powerful Left Premier and is many ranks higher than Lao Ai. They must be relying heavily on Zhu Ji's backing to pass such insolent remarks.

Their hands on their sword hilts, the Palace Guards are waiting for Xiao Pan's command before they started killing.

For the first time, Xiao Pan is experiencing the arrogance of Lao Ai's men. His expression turned grave and his eyes are glowing with anger, causing the blood of everyone and Wu Fu to turn cold.

In this intense and fragile moment where swords can be drawn in an instance, Li Si stood up with a smile and walked towards Han Jie and Guoxin's table.

The entire hall quietened down and watched with tense breaths.

Everyone from Guoxin to Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan are puzzled at Li Si's behaviour.

Li Si whispered some words to Guoxin's table. At that table, everyone's face lost colour and kept quiet while Li Si walked back nonchalantly.

Every table began to whisper nonstop among themselves

and were wondering what did Li Si say to make Lao Ai's men behave themselves obediently.

Under the enquiring gaze of everyone, Li Si sat down and simply explained: "I only told them that Crown Prince has strict orders to kill anyone who dares to annoy Official Xiang before the duel. Thus, the Palace Guards are protecting him and will execute Crown Prince's orders if necessary."

Everyone was full of praise for his quick wit. Overhearing his words, Wu Fu secretly praised Li Si for his intelligence and he thought that Li Si is making it all up.

Xiao Pan was delighted. First, Li Si is clever and resolved the situation and second, Guoxin and his men are afraid of his authority and dared not create any more trouble.

At this moment, someone chortled: "I thought I was mistaken but it is really Shaolong. We did not come here for nothing!"

Everyone glanced over and saw that it was Wang Ci and Wang He. They seemed to be based at another hall but were just passing through.

Just as everyone was panicking inside, the two Generals walked even closer and saw Xiao Pan. Stunned, they exclaimed at the same time: "Crown Prince!"



## CHAPTER 7

## Peak Condition

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

EVERYONE heard the words “Crown Prince” and looked towards their table. Before half a second passed, Huan Yi stood up and bellowed: “Generals are right. It is indeed Crown Prince who asked us to accompany Official Xiang tonight. Will Generals please take a seat?”

When everyone heard his comment, they realised it was just a careless remark and resumed their activities.

Wang Ci and Wang He noticed Xiao Pan’s fake moustache and ordinary warrior suit dressing and could guess what is

going on. They sat down without another word.

Suddenly they heard sounds of teeth chattering. It is Wu Fu whose face has turned entirely green and his lips completely white. He appears to have seen through their cover and identified this Qin Shi as the Crown Prince. He looks as if he wanted to kneel down and pay his respects.

Just as everyone was panicking a second time tonight, Wu Fu's legs softened and he kneeled down.

Teng Yi was quicker than the rest. His hand quickly shot out and supported him, preventing Wu Fu from completely kneeling down and pulling him towards himself. From afar, it looks as if Wu Fu is sitting down besides Teng Yi.

Lord Changping leaned forward and whispered to him: "If Brothel Owner Wu lets anyone know that Crown Prince is here, I will close down your Drunken Wind Brothel and sentence your whole family to death. Are you clear? Hng! You are not allowed to kowtow."

Wu Fu was frightened beyond words. His whole body became limp and he did not even have the energy to nod in agreement.

Xiao Pan lightly praised: "Seeing that everyone acted with wisdom and creativity, I am certain that our country is in good hands and the days of prosperity is near."

With Wu Fu around, Xiang Shaolong cannot say what he truly wants. He warmly warned: "As long as Brothel Owner Wu acts accordingly, I will guarantee your safety. Get moving

and you must not warn the four beauties that Crown Prince is here.”

Wu Fu clumsily got up and paid his respects before slipping away.

Wang Ci raised his cup and wanted to toast Xiao Pan when he recalled something. “Has the wine been tested for poison?” he questioned.

Behind him, a Palace Guard reported: “Great General, all the wine has been tested and they are safe.”

Wang Ci toasted Xiao Pan.

Everyone does not dare to raise their cups yet until Xiao Pan gave the indication. After Xiao Pan’s approval, they drank to their heart’s content.

After the two close encounters, the atmosphere began to return to normal.

Xiao Pan started to speak to Wang Ci and Wang He and learnt that they are here on Po Hu’s invitation.

Wang He coldly state: “This Po Hu is unpredictable. The moment we met, he passed negative comments about Lu Buwei and hinted at Empress’s misbehaviour. It was a waste of time talking to him. We spotted Wu Fu and overheard him telling an attendant to inform Yang Yu and Bailei that Official Xiang is here. Using this opportunity, we excused ourselves.”

Xiao Pan gave a cold snort but did not reply.

Wang Ci laughed: “Shaolong is really charming. When the

two ladies heard that you are here, they both wanted to come immediately but were stopped by Wu Fu. Due to the busy crowd, they can only take turns to come. Yang Yu is presently getting a change of clothes and should be here in a while."

Xiao Pan was amazed: "Are generals mistaken? I thought they are Lu Buwei's followers?"

Wang Ci explained: "At the end of the day, they do not have a real owner. They will belong to whoever that is more powerful. Besides, women adore heroes and Shaolong is our foremost hero of Qin and even Talented Lady Ji has submitted to him. Under the sky, who would not want to be close to him?"

Pleased, Xiao Pan toasted Xiang Shaolong for his success and Xiang Shaolong hurriedly accepted the toast.

Everyone is full of respect for Xiao Pan's magnanimity.

The twinkling sounds of accessories can be heard. With Wu Fu guiding the way, Yang Yu appeared and she is accompanied by two maids. Her steps were delicate and her figure is alluring, captivating the attention of everyone.

Xiao Pan was thrilled: "She truly lives up to her reputation!"

Out of the blue, someone called out: "Miss Yang, please hold your step!"

As everyone turned to look at the speaker with surprise, he turned out to be Shangcai number one swordsman, the young and handsome new recruit of Lu Buwei, Xu Shang.

With a look of displeasure, he walked over.

Yang Yu stopped walking and frowned heavily. She stole a glance at Xiang Shaolong and looked back at Xu Shang who is striding towards her. She was in a difficult position.

Wu Fu is the most anxious and signalled to the two maids to bring Yang Yu to Xiao Pan's table but Yang Yu waved the two maids away.

Instead, Xiao Pan finds it interesting and smiled: "No wonder this place has such good business. Everyone is here to fight over these beauties."

Xu Shang has the coldest expression on his face. He icily interrogated Wu Fu: "Brothel Owner Wu told me earlier that Miss Yang has been reserved by General Du. Why is she able to come out and serve another table now?"

Yang Yu seems to have good intentions towards Xu Shang. Leaning towards him, she mentioned some words and pointed at Xiang Shaolong's table.

Wang Ci is currently the most important military leader in Qin. He coldly dismissed: "Who is this kid? Is he tired of living? Even if Guan Zhongxie is here, he will still have to give me face."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Great General need not bother yourself with these men. Lu Buwei's men are known to be insolent and arrogant. I will make sure they suffer in the future."

Wang Ci sighed with boredom and did not reply.

Wu Fu quickly came up to their table to seek forgiveness. Before he can say a single word, Xiao Pan stated upfront: "This is not your fault and Brothel Owner Wu need not feel bad about it. If Miss Yang wants to come over, so be it. If not, it is ok too."

Not expecting the Crown Prince to be so accommodating, Wu Fu is momentarily stunned.

Lord Changping pulled him over and whispered something to him. Wu Fu left quickly after hearing his words.

Xu Shang looks as if he is going to come to their table but was detained by Yang Yu. She seems to have mentioned Wang Ci's name while talking to Xu Shang.

Yang Duanhe is Wang Ci's most capable general. His expression turning very ugly; he stood up and was about to scold Xu Shang when Li Si dragged him down to his seat. Seated beside him, Li Si smiled: "Why waste your energy over such a man like him?"

Xu Shang stared fiercely once at Xiang Shaolong before returning to his seat. Yang Yu maintained a cheerful expression and the aura of anger in the air quickly dissipated.

As pointed out by Xiang Shaolong, a mystified Yang Yu sat down besides Xiao Pan. She only knew that Xiao Pan is named Qin Shi but does not know his background. But since this person can hang around with Lord Changping, Wang Ci and Xiang Shaolong, he must be someone important. Wu Fu also reminded her many times to offer her best service so she naturally dare not be negligent. She did her best to toast

wine, make jokes and flatter everyone. Xiao Pan is delighted with her services and the atmosphere became livelier as if nothing has happened before.

After a while, Guiyan came to their table too. None of the other guests felt uncomfortable. Based on Wang Ci's standing in Qin, he alone is qualified to ask for the company of these two top beauties.

Guiyan intimately sat down besides Xiang Shaolong and toasted everyone first. Toasting Xiang Shaolong last, she whispered: "Official Xiang is powerful and successful. Please do not bear grudges with a weak woman like me."

After their previous encounter, there is no way Xiang Shaolong can ever trust her again but on the surface, he naturally accepted her apology.

Yang Yu took her leave and she looked once at Xiang Shaolong with deep emotions before turning around. Soon after, Bailei showed up and only the top beauty Dan Meimei has yet to appear.

Among the four beauties, Bailei is the only one who hasn't interacted with Xiang Shaolong before. She treated Xiao Pan well and their communication is quite amiable.

Guiyan whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ears: "Will you stay back tonight? I will do my best to service you." And batted her eyes at him seductively.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say: "Others say that wild flowers smell better than home grown flowers but my feelings are

the exact opposite. How would I know you will not try to kill me again?"

He rejected her on the spot.

With a look of disappointment, Guiyan is about to say something when Wu Fu turned up with a heavy expression: "I am afraid Meimei cannot come."

Lord Changping frowned: "Meimei is not giving us any face?"

Wu Fu was frightened and he shook his head and hands: "No! She has been taken to Premier Mentor Residence. I have tried sending for her three times but was declined. Ai! I cannot say... Hei! It is nothing!"

Everyone's curiosity is aroused.

His eyes flashing with coldness, Xiao Pan concluded: "So it is. Let's finish up. Ha! What an exciting night!"

Wu Fu calmed down but Guiyan and Bailei were unwilling to leave and whined incessantly.

Their persuasion skills are top-notch and effective but it absolutely has no effect on Xiao Pan. This future Qin Shi Huang smiled plainly and stood up, turning around to take his leave. Everyone hurriedly scrambled after him.

With his arm around Guiyan's neck, Xiang Shaolong kissed her cheek and gently advised: "If you want to lead a happy and fulfilling life, you better know what is good for you."

Guiyan's expression darkened. Lowering her head, she promised: "Yanyan will heed your advice. As long as Official



Xiang thinks about me once in a while, I will be more than grateful.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled and bade farewell to Bailei before taking his leave.

Back home, Jing Jun is still full of energy. In the main hall, he prevented Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi from returning back to their rooms and scolded: “Wu Fu that bastard sure knows how to change according to the circumstances. When he saw Wang Ci and Wang He supporting Crown Prince, he told me secretly before we left that he will come personally to pay his respects to Third Brother. Ha! What a bastard.”

Teng Yi interjected: “But I believe that he is caught in between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. He cannot afford to offend either side and is in serious dilemma. Bai Chong told me earlier that Lu Buwei is keen to marry Dan Meimei as a concubine. Wu Fu is naturally troubled.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Tonight may be quite a mess but I can derive deep meanings from it. Firstly, the Crown Prince understood the invisible fight between Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. He also learnt about Po Hu and Du Bi’s ulterior motives. There are also three men who benefitted a lot. Second Brother does not hanker after fame and riches so we can dismiss your case. Li Si and Huan Yi displayed intelligence and courage, gaining the favour of Crown Prince. They should enjoy plenty of promotions in the days to come.”

After a short discussion, Xiang Shaolong can feel the effects of alcohol and had to go back to his bedroom to sleep.

His wives reprimanded him slightly. In his drowsy state, he slept till late morning.

Tian Zheng and Tian Feng helped him to get up and get dressed. Retrieving his Hundred Battle Sabre, he got Teng Yi to spar with him and felt even more rejuvenated than before. He is brimming with energy and vigour.

Ji Yanran was puzzled: "Hubby was out partying last night and came home drunk but now, you look so fresh and energetic. This doesn't make sense."

Putting the Hundred Battle Sabre aside, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "I will be lying if I say I am not concerned about Guan Zhongxie's challenge. But last night was a good time to get drunk, allowing me forget everything. Therefore, I am very relaxed today and with a good night's sleep, I am in my peak condition."

Teng Yi mumbled: "I can vouch for that. I nearly lost hold of the Mozi Sword fighting him."

The girls burst out laughing and it was a joyful sight.

Among their laughter, Wu Yingyuan came up to them with Tao Fang and Jing Jun in tow.

Everyone sat down for breakfast happily and no one is nervous about the imminent battle.

Jing Jun and Teng Yi left for the Command Centre while Xiang Shaolong engaged his father-in-law in conversation. They spoke about Wu Zhuo setting up a giant farm at the northern lands and Xiang Shaolong was filled with a strong

yearning. How he wished it is Xiao Pan's coronation tomorrow and he can begin his new life after that.

While talking, Xiang Shaolong unconsciously fell asleep on the floor rug.

He had a strange dream and saw Zhao Ya, Zhao Qian, Chunying and the other three maids. They are toasting him for finally defeating Guan Zhongxie. Intoxicated, he somehow can sense that he is creating his own fantasy dream. He was stirred by Wu Tingfang patting him.

As he sat up in shock, Wu Tingfang commented: "The Crown Prince has sent someone to summon you into the palace. I wonder what it is. He should give you more time to rest."

Since the death of Zhao Qian, Wu Tingfang is the only person other than Teng Yi who knows about Xiao Pan's real identity. Thus, she is not very respectful when she is speaking about him.

Xiang Shaolong stretched his limbs and can feel that he is at the peak of his mental and physical strength. He himself was surprised that he can sleep so peacefully before the duel. He dared not waste any more time and hurriedly showered, got changed and left towards the palace.

As usual, Xiao Pan received him in his Imperial Study. Lord Changping and Li Si were present as well.

Xiao Pan began: "The Spring Festival is five days later. I will pray at the Wei River that day. Grand Tutor Xiang's Black Dragon should be ready by then!"

Xiang Shaolong confirmed: "Everything is prepared. All we need to know is the exact prayer location and we can act accordingly."

Xiao Pan's eyes lit up followed by a sigh: "It is indeed hard to work without the Empress's support. Looks like I have to mend fences with her."

Li Si advised: "Military control should be our top priority. The rest can come later."

Xiao Pan was furious: "I am unhappy every time I thought of making that fake eunuch a Marquis. Now that Empress has moved to Oasis Palace, I have utterly no idea what the two of them are planning."

Lord Changping comforted: "Mao Jiao will notify us about Lao Ai's activities. Crown Prince please set your mind at ease."

Xiao Pan was angered: "How can I set my mind at ease? There are spies all over and everyone is only thinking for themselves. If not for the Black Dragon, I will summon everyone and conduct a massacre. After that, we will then try to salvage the situation."

Lord Changping knows that he is very mad and dared not comment.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Crown Prince must look at the bright side. Don't forget about the exciting performance tonight. After Guan Zhongxie is killed, we can assign a new Imperial Infantry Commander."

Xiao Pan finally calmed down and everyone discussed further about the Black Dragon after which everyone parted.

Leaving alongside Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong can feel the dominance of the Crown Prince increasing day by day. If he is not angry, his dominance can be heavily felt already. When he is angry, the dominance can be considered stifling. Even Xiang Shaolong who has seen him grow up can feel this effect. The others must be having a worse experience.

Stepping out of the study, a palace maid detained Xiang Shaolong, reporting that Qin Qing wanted to see him.

With an envious look on his face, Lord Changping took his leave.

While he is being led by the palace maid through the winding corridors of the huge palace, Xiang Shaolong thought that with Zhu Ji away in Oasis Palace and Xiao Pan yet to be coroneted, the most influential person in Xianyang Palace now is probably Qin Qing.

Coming to a large and plain building in the rear palace, the palace maid knelt down: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please enter."

Pleased, Xiang Shaolong entered and noticed Qin Qing waiting at the door for him. He could not be bothered with manners and hugged her in his embrace. Qin Qing struggled for a while and leaned back, scrutinizing him for a while. Comforted, she surrendered: "You win! You looked great! You idiot. Why did you go merry making at Drunken Wind Brothel last night? Now, the whole city knows about your

terrible deed.”

Xiang Shaolong already knew that nothing escapes her attention and sat down on one side, still hugging her slender waist. Qin Qing helped him to take off his coat and massaged his shoulder muscles.

Xiang Shaolong is so comfortable he is flying among the clouds. It is truly different after they have made love. In the past, it is difficult for him to even hold her hand but now, she offered to massage him willingly.

Qin Qing gently reminded: “Do not underestimate your enemy! I have word that Guan Zhongxie is even better than before. Ordinary fighters will lose the spirit to fight and surrender after seeing his attacking pose. You may have the Hundred Battle Sabre and Sabre Play but if you are too complacent, you may still lose.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed that he has been underestimating his opponent but it was also because he wasn't bothered about the duel and thus, was very calm, relaxed and focused. He nodded: “Thanks for Grand Tutor Qin's reminder. I will not be so reckless anymore.”

Seeing that he is willing to listen to her advice, Qin Qing was thrilled: “I did not choose the wrong lover. Most men will find us women nagging too much or that our advice is impractical. Only Hubby is the real gentleman.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Grand Tutor Qin seems to be very experienced!”

Qin Qing protested: "You think too much. I have only heard about it from others."

Xiang Shaolong quickly apologised and Qin Qing turned happy again: "Tonight's fight is something that everyone has been anxiously waiting for. From the Crown Prince to the common man, no one is spared. Originally, most people are betting that you will win but after knowing about your drinking and trysts last night, they switched their bets to Guan Zhongxie instead."

Xiang Shaolong clarified: "I did drink but we only asked for the beauties because of the Crown Prince. We only enjoyed their company at the table and did nothing else."

Qin Qing laughed: "But others do not think the same. Moreover, such gossips are bound to be exaggerated. Everyone on the street is saying that you slept with the four beauties. Let's see if you will behave yourself in the future."

Xiang Shaolong laughed so hard he cried.

Qin Qing added: "The latest odds are Guan Zhongxie three to one against you. This shows that he is the people's favourite choice to win."

"What!" Xiang Shaolong exclaimed.

Qin Qing laughed so hard she leaned on him and whined: "If I am a greedy woman, I will lay huge bets on you and make a fortune."

Xiang Shaolong pondered: "Who is hosting this gamble? Without money and a good reputation, it is hard to convince

people.”

Qin Qing replied: “Have you heard of this man named Po Hu? He operates a few large casinos in Tunliu. If not for the gambling ban in Xianyang City, he would have set up casinos here too. Now, he is the mastermind behind the gamble between you and Guan Zhongxie.”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “Didn’t he just arrive in Xianyang City yesterday?”

Qin Qing answered: “He did only arrive yesterday but his men already set up the gamble thirty days ago. He is the king of money making.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Who is this Po Hu exactly?”

Qin Qing responded: “I am not too sure myself. He wields great influence in the three new eastern provinces and is on intimate relations with Du Bi and Zhao General Pang Nuan. During his trip here, he has been busy socializing and giving presents. I am sure he is trying to win friends and open connections to assist Lord Changan Chongqiao in the future.”

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong joked: “Shall we make some money from him? In terms of wealth, my Wu Family is second to none. If he refuses to accept, it will be a loss of face for him. Hng! With three to one, I want to see his face after I win.”

Moved, Qin Qing gave him a tight hug and lamented: “Xiang Shaolong, ah! Is your confidence born naturally with you?”



You seemed to be undefeated in terms of words and actions.”

Embracing her tightly in return, they shared a passionate kiss before he left reluctantly.

Back home, he told Wu Yingyuan about the gamble and odds. Wu Yingyuan was highly interested and quickly went to find Tao Fang for a discussion. Xiang Shaolong returned to the back hall and took this time to rest while being entertained by his wives and son. Soon, it was evening time.

Despite the lack of prior arrangements, Huan Yi, Lord Changping, Jing Jun, Teng Yi, Li Si, Yang Duanhe and Bai Chong arrived at the Wu residence. They all planned to set off with him and showcase their might.

Xiang Shaolong took a shower and put on the warrior suit Qin Qing sewed for him. Beneath, he wore the plated armour. He definitely looks majestic and imposing.

He placed the Hundred Battle Sabre and the Flying Dragon Spear in a black bag and got Jing Shan to carry them, preventing anyone from knowing his true intentions.

After all his preparations, he led his three wives and for the first time, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng, along towards the Premier Mentor Residence. Under the cheering of his household, he left. Wu Yingyuan and Tao Fang also went along.

Travelling along the well lit path of the Xianyang City main street, he was filled with many emotions.

When he first came to this era, he never would have imagined his present success.

At the same time, he can see the ugliness behind all the beautiful things in front of him. In the future, Xiao Pan will use his absolute authority to create the absolute legacy.

Fighting for one's dream is the noblest aspiration.

But after success has been achieved, emotions will have no room in the never ending quest to preserve one's power and wealth.

In the future, Li Si will be a different person too and he is most unwilling to witness this heart-breaking transformation.

In this very moment, he swore to leave immediately after eliminating Lao Ai and Lu Buwei.

The Premier Mentor Residence is appearing in his sight and diagonally opposite it is Lao Ai's Inner Custodian Residence. These two will represent the two pillars of influence before Xiao Pan's coronation.

And he is the fish swimming between these two powers.

Thinking about this, he was filled with heroism. He nearly wanted to face the sky and shout out loud, expressing his righteous pride.

## CHAPTER 8

## The Birthday Banquet

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

THE newly built Premier Mentor Residence is the most imposing architecture besides Xianyang Palace. It is even more outstanding than Zhu Ji's Oasis Palace.

The residence faces the Palace exactly and is surrounded by high walls. After passing through the main gate, there is a large courtyard that can serve as a training ground for one thousand men. There are three main buildings and they are connected by extensive corridors. From south to north, everything is made of the best wood or clay. The four sides

are surrounded by slopes and all the buildings have elaborate roofs and are supported by double pillars. It is as imposing as can be.

A room in the main hall is dedicated to be the ancestral hall. Besides the main halls, there are nearly thirty separate blocks of buildings which are used for housing, storage, cooking and other purposes. The buildings are divided neatly according to left and right side of the halls.

Lush greenery can be found around the main halls and it was an inviting environment. The residence must have been designed by a famous architect, highlighting Lu Buwei's enormous wealth.

Anyone of importance in Xianyang City was all present. With the additional excitement of witnessing Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie's duel, everyone was highly enthusiastic and the atmosphere has reached a feverish pitch.

Over ten thousand lanterns were lighted for the celebrations and congratulatory messages on auspicious red cloth can be found hanging on the main gate and all over the gardens, adding to the celebratory mood.

Scores of family warriors are dressed in neat warrior uniforms and were guarding the main gate, preventing people from coming in uninvited.

After entering the door, there are counters for guests to register themselves and present their gifts. It was a well prepared arrangement. Despite the numerous guests streaming in incessantly, everything was well laid out and

there were no signs of chaos.

All the three main halls are open to accommodate the guests and the hall in the centre is naturally the largest, with the ability to seat a thousand guests. The other two halls can only seat about five hundred guests each.

Those who were assigned to the sub halls can only accept their fate helplessly as they are not as influential as those in the main centre hall. They can only pray to squeeze into the main hall to watch the fight later on.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived, none of the guests have been seated yet and were dispersed around the hall exteriors and gardens, chatting among themselves. The air is filled by their voices.

It is a beautiful night with a new moon and the absence of snow. There is still five days before the beginning of spring so the weather is warming up, adding flavour to the birthday event.

For those who lack the awareness, this boisterous celebration is just a cover for the intense power struggle of the Qin empire. Xiang Shaolong is confident that tonight's victory or loss will directly impact the future of the seven states during the Warring Period and decide the history of China.

He is the pivotal point in this struggle.

When his large entourage arrived at the main gate of the Premier Mentor Residence, there was a mad rush as

everyone wanted to see their hero.

Riding besides Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping joked: "Those people who bet on your loss must be very disappointed to see you so energetic and refreshed despite the brothel visit last night."

Xiang Shaolong joked back: "If I really lose, I need not go back to the Wu Residence. My father in law has placed a huge bet on me. If I caused him to lose money, what do you think will happen?"

Lord Changping was stunned: "I did not know your father in law is a gambler."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "He is not a gambler but he will love to see Po Hu going bankrupt when honouring his loss. After that, let's see what he can use to bribe the officials and royal family members."

Lord Changping burst out laughing and leapt down his horse.

Tu Xian who is in charge of welcoming the guests advanced towards them. Ordering his men to rein in the horses, he whispered to Xiang Shaolong: "That man is secretly wearing a soft armour that is specially made by Yue Blacksmiths. You better attack his head. Otherwise, he can allow himself to be pierced by your spear without suffering any harm and take this chance to kill you."

Xiang Shaolong whispered back: "Did you see me bring a spear tonight?"

Tu Xian was taken aback and seemed to understand but

doesn't seem to understand too. Someone came up to them and he can only swallow his question and spoke about some other unimportant stuff.

Sounds of music can be heard playing from the main hall, indicating that some important guest has just entered.

As Tao Fang is busy presenting their gifts, Xiang Shaolong glanced around and noticed most of the guests are unwilling to enter the halls to see Lu Buwei but are loitering around the courtyard engaging in idle chatter while enjoying the decorations and landscaping. Qin Qing just arrived too and joined Ji Yanran and the girls. With other female members of the royal family, they were joking and giggling, attracting plenty of attention from other guests. On one hand, they were attracted by their beauty and on the other hand, they were puzzled that they can still joke and laugh in a relaxed mood despite knowing that their hubby is going to fight a strong opponent later on.

The people of Qin are open-minded and loved this kind of environment. Those who have the most fun are the young beauties from prestigious families like Ying Ying and Lu Dan'er. It is also a good time for the young men to showcase their literacy talents. The scenic settings make it even better for them.

While Xiang Shaolong and the others are talking about Po Hu's gambling racket; Lu Dan'er appeared out of nowhere and wriggled her finger, signalling Jing Jun to go over to her.

It so happens that a group of young children walked

between Jing Jun and Lu Dan'er, so Jing Jun did not see her signal. Xiang Shaolong saw her first and feeling cheeky, he walked over and pretended to lecture in a strict tone: "You are going to get married soon and do not even know how to greet your elders. What is the world coming too?"

With her hands on her waist, Lu Dan'er wailed: "Hng! Whose elder are you? Do you even care if I am getting married? Yi!" She recalled that Xiang Shaolong is Jing Jun's Third Brother and her face turned red instantly. Stomping her foot, she cried: "You are so irritating, you big bully."

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing and pushed Jing Jun who has just came up to them towards her. He proudly smiled: "Dear Dan'er, I will wait for the day you kneel down and offer me your wedding toast!"

At a disadvantage, Lu Dan'er dared not berate him. Holding Jing Jun's hand, she slipped away into the crowd with him.

Shaking his head and sighing, Ying Ying's voice suddenly rang out beside him: "Official Xiang!"

Turning around, Xiang Shaolong got a big fright: "What is your expression so pale?"

Ying Ying bitterly smiled: "I did not sleep well for many nights. Ai! Since things have come to such a stage, what more can I say?"

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "No matter what happens tonight, it can be considered a closure for you. In the future, dedicate all your love to Brother Duanhe and be a good wife



and mother!”

Ying Ying moved closer and softly asked: “Tell me, if Guan Zhongxie never appeared, would you have married me?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “By now, I think there is no need for such kinds of questions or answers!”

Ying Ying insisted: “No! If I do not find out the truth, I will never be satisfied.”

Xiang Shaolong helplessly confessed: “Once, I did have feelings for you.”

Ying Ying lowered her head and whispered: “If anything happens to you tonight, I will not marry... Ai! I will not say anymore. Ah!”

Looking at her crestfallen face, Xiang Shaolong can only shake his head with a bitter smile. Ying Ying seems to think that he will certainly lose.

Xiang Shaolong naturally wasn't bothered by her thoughts and went back to Lord Changping and Teng Yi's side. Lord Changping inquired: “What did my sister say?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “Nothing interesting.”

Lord Changping coldly snorted: “How can there be nothing interesting? She may have decided to marry Duanhe but is still pining for Guan Zhongxie. She kept saying you are not his match. How infuriating.”

The other guests are beginning to enter the banquet halls. Wu Yingyuan felt embarrassed to stay outside for too long

and waved to everyone to enter together.

Since he is their senior, everyone obeyed without question.

Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and his sons are at the main door welcoming the guests. The air is filled with congratulatory messages.

Lord Changping is probably the most unassuming and easy going Left Premier of Qin. Despite his exalted status, he entered the hall alongside Xiang Shaolong and Wu Yingyuan, offering his congratulations to Lu Buwei.

Wu Yingyuan is an experienced man when it comes to socializing. He comfortably wished Lu Buwei a long list of auspicious congratulatory phrases.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but think about the close relationship between Lu Buwei and the Wu Family in the past compared to all the present hostility. His heart is troubled with mixed emotions.

In his mind, Lu Buwei must have condemned Xiang Shaolong to lose the fight and his life. With a delighted and welcoming expression, his face is glowing with pleasure and was chatting and joking without a care in the world. When he spotted Xiang Shaolong, his eyes lit up. Abandoning his other guests, he personally welcomed: "Tonight is my lucky night. I celebrate my birthday and will gain a fine son in law. With my success, life has no more regrets."

Xiang Shaolong was thinking that his biggest regret is his inability to be the King of Qin. On the surface, he acted

normal and offered his congratulations like everybody else.

Before Lu Buwei can say anything else, Xiang Shaolong gestured to the people behind him. Everyone breezed through the door and do not have to offer any hypocritical wishes.

After a few steps, a silhouette flashed by. Lu Niang Rong appeared in front of Xiang Shaolong and with a cold expression, she state: "Official Xiang, I need to speak to you privately."

Huan Yi, Teng Yi and the rest moved on and followed the ushers to their seats.

Lu Niang Rong plainly remarked: "Official Xiang, please come with me!"

Xiang Shaolong is certain that she has nothing good to say and can feel a grudge for her. Following her through the banquet tables, they came to an external door leading towards the central garden. Xiang Shaolong stopped and insisted: "Can we just say it here? Otherwise, others may start to gossip about us."

The Guardians are initially behind him. Hearing his words, they fanned out in all four directions and prevent people from getting close to them.

Lu Niang Rong turned around and icily commented: "Since when did you become so timid and afraid of gossip? Moreover, if you win, I will be your woman. What is there to be frightened of?"

Xiang Shaolong can detect the sarcasm in her voice. Though angered, he would not hold it against her. He simply smiled: "I am sure Third Mistress asked me here for a better reason than just ridiculing me."

Lu Niang Rong's eyes shone sharply and she replied in a deep voice: "Of course! I am not in the mood to chat with you and only want to ask you a question: Since you do not love me, why did you accept Zhongxie's challenge?"

Unable to hold it any longer, Xiang Shaolong coldly smiled: "All Third Mistress needs to do later is to publicly announce that you are only willing to marry Official Guan. Then, even if I want to fight him, there is no reason to."

Her pretty face turning grave cold, Lu Niang Rong stared fiercely at him for some time before slowly nodding: "Fine! I shall see how you end up tonight."

With a vicious stomp, she returned to the main hall.

After her fragrance has dissipated from the air, Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself.

Lu Niang Rong may be an evil woman but she has his interests at heart. She wanted to dissuade him from fighting because like Ying Ying, she thinks he will surely lose the fight. But in order to kill Guan Zhongxie, he had to ignore her good intentions.

Back at the main hall, most of the guests have already been seated. Everyone is turning their heads, looking and pointing at him. It seems like the duel between him and Guan

Zhongxie is a recurring topic in their conversations.

Due to the large number of guests, besides the three hosting tables at the south, the rest of the tables are divided into two sides, the left and right side. Each side has four layers of tables and each table can seat four persons. They are all facing the spacious stage in the middle of the hall which will soon be the centre of attraction for song and dance performances and the duel as well.

As it is time to be seated, an usher came up to them and led them towards their seats.

Xiang Shaolong is seated in the first row of the right side, eight tables away from the hosting tables.

The other people in the first rows are naturally Lord Changping, Wang He, Wang Ci and other prominent generals. Opposite them in the first rows are Wang Wan, Cai Ze, Lao Ai and the influential people in the Premier Mentor Residence. Guan Zhongxie, however, cannot be found.

Sitting down besides Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Yingyuan, Xiang Shaolong discovered his three wives and Qin Qing seated on the same row ahead of them and are sending him sweet looks and smiles, adding to his joy. Looking behind them, he saw the same sweet looks and smiles from the pretty and attractive Tian sisters. Incidentally, Tao Fang is sharing their table.

The Guardians are sitting behind Xiang Shaolong's table.

After some idle chat with Wu Yingyuan, Xiang Shaolong

looked towards the main door. The group of thirty odd musicians on both sides of the door have stopped playing while Lu Buwei, Lu Niang Rong and the others have disappeared. Only Tu Xian is left welcoming the guests.

Out of the blue, Wu Yingyuan poked Xiang Shaolong under the table. Xiang Shaolong broke out of his trance and scanned around. He finally noticed Du Bi and Po Hu seated opposite them and were leaving their seats and walking towards them. Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun can only follow Wu Yingyuan's example by standing up to greet them.

Po Hu is looking straight ahead while Du Bi stared viciously at Ji Yanran and Qin Qing with jealousy. Although he pretended to be looking around aimlessly, his behaviour did not escape the sharp observation skills of Xiang Shaolong.

In between the adjoining tables, everyone introduced themselves and mentioned the usual courtesies. Po Hu's sharp eyes assessed Xiang Shaolong for a while and he chuckled: "Official Xiang is truly an outstanding talent which is rare among men. No wonder Master Wu placed a huge bet on you. As a friend, I wish you victory but as a businessman, I wish for the opposite. My heart is in a dilemma!"

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand Huan Yi's dislike for this man. Based on his demeanour and attitude, he seems to regard everyone and everything as a business transaction. It is even more obvious just by looking at his eyes.

Wu Yingyuan is an experienced socialite. He laughed: "Master Po is too serious. My little bet in nothing in your eyes and of course, will hardly affect your wealth and harming our friendship."

Xiang Shaolong and his wives overheard his words and were full of admiration.

Du Bi smiled: "Master Wu's answer is really great. If Official Xiang's sword skill is as great, he will definitely win tonight. When that happens, I am afraid Master Po will have to sell his properties in order to honour his loss."

Xiang Shaolong joked: "Today, I finally learnt that Great General knows how to tell jokes too. Master Po's wealth is immeasurable; just by taking any banknote from his wallet is more than enough for all of us to be VIP clients in Drunken Wind Brothel night after night."

Hearing his exaggerated words, everyone is highly amused and even Ji Yanran and the girls are smiling like flowers in full blossom, attracting the attention of those who are interested in them.

The door attendant announced: "The Empress and Crown Prince arrives!"

The music began to start playing.

All the elegantly dressed maids who are serving wine and food are the first to kneel down.

Po Hu and Du Bi bade their farewells and returned to their table.

The rest of the guests kneeled down and prepare to welcome the Empress and Crown Prince.

Jing Jun reminded: "The man seated between Lao Ai and Han Jie is Headmaster Qiu Risheng of the Weinan Martial Arts School."

Xiang Shaolong slanted his face to one side, facing Lao Ai's table and promptly identified Qiu Risheng.

It so happens that Qiu Risheng and Han Jie are looking over at him too. When their eyes met, all three men felt slightly awkward.

This is the second time Xiang Shaolong has seen Qiu Risheng. He first saw him during his duel with Wang Jian. Due to the distance between them during that time, he did not have a clear impression of this man. This expert swordsman has fine features and his limbs are longer than the ordinary man, giving the impression that they are very sensitive and agile. Around the age of thirty five, his eyes are brimming with energy and he has the air of an extraordinary man. Looking at his appearance alone, one can already feel that he is an extremely fearsome opponent. No wonder Lao Ai is so keen to recruit him.

He also noticed Xiao Pan's spy, Mao Jiao seated behind their table with Ling Qi and Guoxin. His status is below that of Qiu Risheng, Han Jie and Lao Si who are sharing Lao Ai's table.

The door attendant made another announcement and the music played even louder. Sixteen palace guards first paved the way before Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei strode into the



hall.

Behind them are Lord Changwen and another sixteen palace guards. They are followed by the key people of Lu Buwei's household including Lu Niang Rong and the newly arrived Guan Zhongxie.

Despite the short interval, Guan Zhongxie is certainly more powerful than before. He walked with strong, confident steps and his eyes are shining as if they are electrified. In an intimidating manner, he walked ahead of a group of family warriors. Except for his near equal swordsman Xu Shang, everyone else seems to be despised by him.

When Xiang Shaolong caught sight of him, Guan Zhongxie happened to see him too. Exchanging a long stare, it was like two lightning bolts striking from each other's eyes.

As tonight is Lu Buwei's grand birthday celebration and given his special status as the Premier Mentor, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan displayed their respect and insisted that he take the main seat.

After some tussling, Lu Buwei finally sat down.

Guan Zhongxie and his men took their seats.

After everyone got seated too, their attention subconsciously turned towards Guan Zhongxie.

The most annoying thing is Lu Niang Rong sitting right besides Guan Zhongxie, highlighting Lu Buwei's dissatisfaction with Xiang Shaolong and hinting that Guan Zhongxie will win the duel without question.

In the front row too, Guan Zhongxie is seated one table lower than Lao Ai. Sharing his table are Lian Jiao and Zhao Pu the two expert swordsmen. The old birds Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen are seated behind them. They must have lost favour with Lu Buwei after failing to live up to expectations during the hunting fair. They have been replaced by the new swordsmen.

This is typical of Lu Buwei's ingratitude character.

After Xiao Pan mentioned some hypocritical words commending Lu Buwei's achievements, the long awaited birthday banquet finally began.

## CHAPTER 9

## Appetizers

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

AFTER a teasing performance by the song courtesans of Premier Mentor Residence, Meng Ao, Wang Wan and Cai Ze led the entire hall in toasting Lu Buwei for his birthday, adding to the lively atmosphere.

Following that, Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niang Rong and the other clansmen led Lu Buwei to the other two halls to toast the other guests.

As Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji are still around, the thousand strong banquet is still quite noisy and were chatting about the

imminent duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie, speculating who the winner will be.

Opposite him, Lao Ai faced Xiang Shaolong and raised his cup, wishing him success in his fight. Xiang Shaolong smiled back knowingly and put his own cup to his lips. He did not drink at all but is just putting on a show. Out of a sudden, Wu Tingfang gestured to him to come over. Puzzled, Xiang Shaolong shifted nearer to them and asked in a low voice: "What is it?"

Ji Yanran inched closer to him and replied in a deep voice: "Lu Buwei is really despicable. Earlier, Meng Tian walked past us and secretly whispered: Qi ambush in front of Wu Residence. Lu Buwei is going all out to kill you tonight. If Guan Zhongxie failed to kill you, others will. But even I cannot understand why the assassins from Qi?"

It is not unusual for people to ambush him but given Lu Buwei's risk-taking style, even Xiang Shaolong is baffled over Lu Buwei's choice to use Qi assassins.

He had wanted to tease Qin Qing who is sitting on the other side but noticed Zhu Ji staring at them. Frightened out of his senses, Xiang Shaolong swallowed all his words and returned to his seat, taking the chance to update Teng Yi and Jing Jun about the ambush.

Teng Yi coldly snorted and turned around to speak to Jing Shan sitting behind him. Within a few minutes, Wu Yan Zhu left to make the necessary arrangements.

The sound of music was being played once again. Before Lu

Buwei can be seen, his delightful laughter can already be heard. With Guan Zhongxie and his family escorting him, he entered the main hall a second time in his best ever mood. Everyone stood up and gave him a standing ovation.

Extremely flattered, Lu Buwei strode right to the centre of the hall. When his cup is filled again, he raised his cup towards Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan, bellowing: "Let's toast Empress and Crown Prince first."

Besides Xiang Shaolong, Wu Yingyuan coldly cursed: "I want to see how long this heartless man can continue like this."

Looking at Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei toasting each other, Xiang Shaolong cannot help but feel emotional.

This can be considered the peak of Lu Buwei's glory. Later, he will fail to kill himself and shortly after, the Black Dragon will be sighted. Significant changes will be made to the Qin Court and his authority will be vastly limited. Another reason for his decline in influence is the rise of Lao Ai.

By now, Lu Buwei's toasting party has arrived in front of their table. Holding a full cup of wine, Guan Zhongxie walked closer and facing Xiang Shaolong, he toasted: "No matter who wins tonight, I am full of admiration for Official Xiang."

Glancing at his formidable opponent, Xiang Shaolong returned the courtesies with a smile.

Both men only made a show of drinking the wine.

When everyone has returned to their seats, Lu Buwei stood up again and announced: "The Chancellor of Qi, Tian Dan,

has sent me a troupe of circus performers. Every person in the circus has an amazing talent to perform and I guarantee everyone will be blown away.”

The guests were expecting him to announce the duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie instead. Slightly disappointed, their thoughts were interrupted by a circus of over a hundred performers. The performers are elaborately dressed and agile, earning loud praises and applause from the crowd.

Xiang Shaolong and his men were alarmed.

The Qi assassins must be referring to these circus performers.

Everyone is captivated by their first impression of the circus. On the outer circle, there were ten odd strongmen somersaulting on the spot. In the centre, there is a cheerleader stacking formation of thirty over people. Under the leadership of a midget dressed as a clown, it was a highly entertaining show. The most enthralling part is the formation. Except for the eight hunks forming the base, the next three layers are all sexy women. The Qi lady at the top of the pyramid is as beautiful as a goddess from heaven. She may not be as pretty as Ji Yanran and the others but can be considered the top of her league.

The other performers are gathered around the formation and are performing different kinds of difficult stunts.

With the accompanying music and cheering of the crowd, the formation spread open like a flower blossoming. Four of

the hunks rolled out in four different directions while the ladies slide down like cascading water. Some of them are seated on the floor and some are lying down, performing 'soft bone' twisting of their bodies. Most of their poses are highly seductive and teasing.

The prettiest Qi lady somersaulted down and continued to somersault till the front of Lu Buwei, presenting him with a longevity peach made of solid gold.

In charge of Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji's safety, Lord Changwen and his Palace Guards are very anxious, eyeing the performers with utmost suspicion. They cannot allow anyone with ulterior motives to come too close to the rulers.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and his men watched the performance with rapt attention. Witnessing the abilities of these men and women, they know they mustn't take them lightly during the ambush later.

If not for Meng Tian's warning, they may be caught with their pants down and suffer a severe setback.

The beauties continued to perform their 'soft bone' techniques and dance, attracting thunderous applause.

After the circus group has left, the various guests are still talking among themselves and could not seem to forget the lasting impression of the 'soft bone' beauties.

Lu Buwei stood up again and everyone quietened down in anticipation of a good show.

Nearly a thousand pairs of eyes are staring at this huge risk-

taker.

Lu Buwei dryly cough and was about to speak when Lao Ai stood up with a grin. Paying his respects to Lu Buwei, Lao Ai smiled at the bewildered guests: "If I did not guess incorrectly, Premier Mentor is going to announce the duel between Official Xiang and Official Guan."

Lu Buwei chuckled: "Official Lao truly know me well. You are absolutely correct. May I know if you have anything important to say?"

Lu Buwei's tone is very sarcastic, secretly warning Lao Ai that he is what he is because of Zhu Ji's support. If not, he'll be a dead man by now.

Even if Lao Ai is unhappy, it did not show on his face. He plainly suggested: "Good things come in pairs. We should have some appetizers before the main dish. Why don't we have a duel between your family warriors and mine? It can add to the excitement of the main duel. What does Premier Mentor think?"

None of the guests expected Lao Ai to abruptly stand out and challenge Lu Buwei. The people of Qin love fights and duelling is common during banquets. Most of them began to cheer loudly in support.

Xiao Pan saw that Lao Ai spoke up without consulting his opinion first. He knows that with Zhu Ji's support, Lao Ai does not hold himself in high regard and is even more arrogant than Lu Buwei. His mind began to detest this man even more.



Wu Yingyuan whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “Lao Ai wants a piece of the action.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled knowingly.

He naturally understood what Wu Yingyuan meant.

Since the rise of the warlords in the Zhou Dynasty, it became popular to recruit and house family warriors as a show of might. Besides having talented men to assist oneself, it is also a status symbol.

It is also common for the family warriors of different warlords to engage each other in friendly competitions.

With Zhu Ji’s support, Lao Ai’s influence has been growing exponentially. He wanted to use this platform as an opportunity for himself to showcase his might and gain recognition and fame. If his own warrior can defeat Lu Buwei’s warrior, the value of the warrior will go up and it will also look good on him, killing two birds with one stone.

To a certain extent, Lao Ai believes that Guan Zhongxie has a higher chance of winning the duel. If he can clock his own victory, even if Guan Zhongxie really defeated Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie is not the sole winner tonight. Lao Ai himself will have a winner too and ruin the perfect winning dream of Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong scanned the expressions of Lao Ai’s followers and noticed that Ling Qi’s expression is slightly abnormal. He immediately knew that this scheme is hatched from his brain and reminded himself to be extra cautious of this man.

Lu Buwei chuckled again and seems to have seen through Lao Ai's intention. He turned around and bowed to Xiao Pan: "Friendly competitions can add to the excitement and liveliness of the banquet. It can also showcase our talents of Qin. Will the Crown Prince please approve."

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji's face lost some colour, knowing that Lu Buwei intentionally asked Xiao Pan for permission because of ill intentions. He wanted to increase the discontentment between Zhu Ji, Lao Ai and Xiao Pan. He behaves as if he is the only one who respects Xiao Pan.

The whole hall quietened down and the thousand pairs of eyes are now staring at this future Qin Shi Huang.

Xiao Pan was smart enough to ignore Lu Buwei's intrinsic meaning. Grinning, he faced Lao Ai and asked: "Who is Subject Lao sending out to show his expert sword skills?"

Han Jie stood up and strode towards the centre of the hall. Kneeling down, he reported: "I am Han Jie from Inner Custodian Residence. Will Empress and Crown Prince grant me the permission to fight."

His words hint of arrogance and he emphasized Zhu Ji's title, openly opposing Lu Buwei lack of consideration for Zhu Ji earlier.

For the past month, Han Jie is gaining some reputation in Xianyang City and he is almost as famous as Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie. Every guest is thrilled to see him stepping out to fight and cheered even louder.

Lu Buwei smiled slightly and sat down.

Xiao Pan faced Zhu Ji and proposed: "Will Empress please decide."

With his words, everyone became even more excited. This 'appetizer' fight is definitely taking place. After all, Zhu Ji will not go against the wishes of her favourite subject Lao Ai.

As anticipated, Zhu Ji softly consented: "Han Jie is one of the best students of Ji Xia Sword Saint Mister Wang You, Cao Quidao. Your swordsmanship must be unparallel. However, Premier Mentor Residence has no lack of talent. Please send your best man and make Mister Han exhibit his top skills, giving us the chance to marvel at his proficiency."

Teng Yi saw that Zhu Ji is obviously supporting Lao Ai and putting Lu Buwei down. Even though he has no good feelings for Lu Buwei, he could not help but whispered to Xiang Shaolong: "How I wish I can go up there myself and kick Han Jie that damn turtle's sorry ass."

Amused, Xiang Shaolong replied: "Second Brother will have your chance. Why not use this chance to see what wondrous skill this damn turtle has?"

Jing Jun affirmed: "I am confident Traitor Lu will send Xu Shang out. Except for him and Guan Zhongxie, there is no one who can match the damn turtle's skills."

Besides the three of them, all the other guests are also speculating who will be the representative from Lu Buwei's side.

The outcome of this fight will affect Lu Buwei's standing and prestige. Lu Buwei will have to make a careful choice.

True enough, Lu Buwei's eyes rested on Xu Shang. Without prior notice, Xu Shang's martial brother Lian Jiao coldly snorted and stood up, bowing: "Will Premier Mentor please allow me to fight on your behalf."

Lian Jiao is also considered a hot favourite among the expert swordsmen in Qin. He displayed his skills on many occasions and has helped Lu Buwei won many battles. Seeing him volunteering to fight, everyone cheered loudly for him.

Apparently, Lu Buwei has confidence in him too. He approved with a nod: "All right. Remember, this is a friendly match."

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang frowned at the same time, showing their lack of confidence in Lian Jiao.

Drumbeats are being sounded.

Everyone knows that a good fight is about to happen.

Both men stood several feet away from each other and are lined up so that Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei can see both of the equally well from the hosting tables. Both men paid their respects to the hosts before quickly turning around and facing each other. The four eyes met one another.

Normally, Han Jie maintains a proud look but presently, he is like a completely different person. He looks extremely serious and focused all his energy in assessing his opponent. He did not show the least sign of underestimating his

opponent.

His right hand is holding onto his sword hilt in a firm but relaxed manner. His legs are apart and he looked as steady as a mountain. He did not strike any fighting pose but his simple standing there has already given everyone the impression of a terrifying expert swordsman.

Even Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are secretly rooting for him.

His eyes became as sharp as a sword and he showed no signs of emotion, making him appear to be a deeply mysterious and unfathomable character.

The hall is so quiet one can hear a pin drop. Everyone held their breaths in silence and did not show any signs of impatience. It is not that everyone is patient tonight but somehow, the immobile Han Jie's fighting aura has already filled the hall and stifled everyone.

The stifling aura conveys one clear message: He will not attack unnecessarily but if he attacks, it will be an earth shattering attack with ultimate strength and precision.

Across Wu Yingyuan's back, Teng Yi wondered: "This kid is Shan Rou's martial disciple. Why are their sword styles so different?"

Xiang Shaolong had just exchanged a knowing look with Ji Yanran. Hearing his words, he explained: "Since Cao Quidao can train two completely different students according to their abilities, we have to accept that he is already at

Grandmaster level.”

Teng Yi nodded in agreement.

An ordinary Sword Master will only know how to impart his own skills to his disciples and create copies of himself.

Only someone who has transcended all sword skills can teach according to the aptitudes, strengths and shortcomings of his students.

Shan Rou's strength lies in speed and her sword styles focused on agility.

Han Jie's forte is his steadiness so his sword attacks are ruthless.

From these two person's accomplishments, one can know the unparalleled level of swordsmanship Cao Quidao has attained.

Opposite him, the usually insolent Lian Jiao is equally serious in this life-and-death situation. He waits patiently for Han Jie's first move.

On the surface, there is no sign of him losing out in terms of fighting spirit. His long sword has been drawn and held horizontally in front of his chest. However, everyone can feel that he is inferior compared to Han Jie who hasn't even drawn his sword.

After some time, both men are still waiting for each other to move first. Out of a sudden, Han Jie moved slightly forward, like a hunter who is looking for the weakness of his prey. His

eyes grew even sharper and he stared unblinkingly at Lian Jiao.

Although the distance between the two men is still about the same as before, it felt like Han Jie had already made the first move. It is a feeling that cannot be put into words.

Finally, Lian Jiao can no longer withstand Han Jie's pressure and reacted. With a loud roar, the sword in his hand began to move. Matching it with precise footwork, he closed the distance between him and Han Jie.

After a few fake moves, the sword eventually cumulated in a strike at Han Jie's right hand that is holding onto the sword hilt.

In the eyes of the experienced swordsmen, Lian Jiao's every move can be used to deceive the enemy and increase his own ferocity. His sword moves have reached the peak in terms of attacking strength management.

He is also wise in attacking his opponent's hand directly. This way, it is more difficult for Han Jie to pull out his sword to counter attack.

Even if Han Jie does not suffer any heavy injury, a small mistake during a duel of expert swordsmen can be the cause for failure. In conclusion, Lian Jiao is worthy of being classified as a top expert swordsman based on his sword skill and attacking strategy.

Even Xiang Shaolong felt that Han Jie has underestimated his opponent and is feeling sorry for him.

JIANG!

Using his right foot, Han Jie stepped forward by one step and his body is in an odd position. His sword slid out in a bright shimmering flash. In the split second that was too close for comfort, he managed to use his half-drawn sword to block Lian Jiao devastating blow.

Never in his wildest dreams did Lian Jiao expect such a bizarre move from Han Jie. He could not change his attack as he had put in all his effort.

Han Jie actually took another step forward and hit out with his right shoulder, knocking squarely into Lian Jiao's chest. Using his right hand, he forcefully pushed his sword back into the sheath. The tip of Lian Jiao's sword is locked in a grip between the sheath and Han Jie's sword.

Everyone present is thoroughly shaken. This kind of swordplay is indeed rare and unique.

Of course Lian Jiao's sword can still be retrieved but his attacking aura has completely dissipated. After receiving the blow on his chest, it is even more embarrassing for Lian Jiao. Pulling back his sword, Lian Jiao hurriedly retreated.

An overwhelming attack has been totally negated and Lian Jiao has lost his first-move advantage.

JIANG!

Han Jie's smooth and sharp blade finally left its sheath.

As long as one is not blind, anyone can tell that this is a



priceless and exquisite weapon.

Xiang Shaolong had to admit that Han Jie's sword is even better than Bloodwave which is given to him by Li Mu.

Teng Yi sighed: "Lian Jiao is finished!"

"Stop!"

Everyone was stunned.

Originally, Han Jie's sword is about to press on with an attack but after hearing this command, he sheathe his sword.

Lian Jiao is still heavily pressured by Han Jie's aura and took seven consecutive steps back. Although he has yet to lose officially, anyone can tell that he is at a serious disadvantage.

After everyone collected themselves and look for the speaker, they discovered that it is Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie heartily laughed: "Brother Han, may I know who is the blacksmith who forged your sword is and what is its name?"

If it was anyone else, the crowd would have jeered and protested, saying that Guan Zhongxie is trying to help Lian Jiao as they belong to the same gang. But Guan Zhongxie has an unassuming air around him so no one will hold it against him for having ulterior motives.

So happens that Han Jie is facing Guan Zhongxie anyway. He smiled once and drew his sword again. He unexpectedly threw his sword towards Guan Zhongxie. Due to his special throwing method, by the time the sword is about three feet

away from Guan Zhongxie, the sword hilt is facing towards Guan Zhongxie.

Under the dazed expression of the crowd, Guan Zhongxie comfortably stretched out his hand and formed a tiger claw with his thumb facing down. He caught the sword precisely without any hesitation.

Time seems to have stop in its tracks.

The conceited aura of the sword has been dissolved as it lay obediently in Guan Zhongxie's hands.

Holding the sword horizontally in front of his eyes, Guan Zhongxie could not help but praise.

Witnessing Guan Zhongxie's skill in catching his flying sword, Han Jie is slightly agitated like everyone else. He smiled: "The sword is named Breaking Armies and is one of the ten swords in my Master's collection. It is forged by Ouyezi."

The crowd began to mumble among themselves.

Ouyezi is a master forger and he is only second to Gan Jiang Mo Xie couple in terms of sword forgery. The sword is worth a king's ransom.

Lian Jiao is in an awkward position. Standing there, he can neither retreat nor attack.

After admiring the sword for some time, Guan Zhongxie threw the sword back at Han Jie, smiling: "The sword is good but the swordsman is great. My martial brother has lost this round. In the future, I will definitely seek your advice."

Everyone began to clap loudly. The applause are not for Han Jie's unassailable sword skills but for Guan Zhongxie's magnanimous handling of the situation

Lao Ai and his men naturally felt uncomfortable.

Xiang Shaolong and his men are full of admiration. In one move, Guan Zhongxie pacified the crowd, saved Lian Jiao's life and put down Han Jie's arrogance, killing three birds in one stone. Only he has this kind of ability.

All the guests unconsciously looked at Guan Zhongxie, followed by Xiang Shaolong. In a way, Guan Zhongxie has gain an edge over Xiang Shaolong and Xiang Shaolong is temporarily a forgotten hero.

Lu Buwei is extremely pleased with the turn of events; from a potential loss of life and face to a neutral conclusion. Raising his cup, he toasted: "Come! Let's drink to this extraordinary fight!"

Amidst the loud cheering, everyone toasted in return.

Without saying another word, Lian Jiao returned to his seat.

Han Jie received a cup of wine from an attendant and drank it like the victor before returning to his seat. He continued to put on the airs of someone who has won the fight.

Lu Buwei is about to say something else when Guoxin abruptly stood up from his seat behind Lao Ai. After paying his respects to the hosts, he loudly declared: "The earlier battle was thrilling but not thrilling enough. I am interested to fight as well and would like to challenge someone to add

to the liveliness. Will Empress, Crown Prince and Premier Mentor please give me your consent.”

Hearing his words, the crowd turned silent and everyone has the same question on his mind: Who does he want to challenge?

Even Lao Ai frowned, indicating that the matter has not been approved by him.

Only Qiu Risheng and the other members of Weinan Martial Arts School have a look of preparedness on their faces. Needless to say, they have planned for this a long time ago and wanted to use this golden opportunity to bring fame and glory to the school.

Xiang Shaolong has a sudden realization and knows the identity of the person Guoxin wanted to challenge.

## CHAPTER 10

## Repaying Enmity with Kindness

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

WITHIN Lao Ai's faction, there are some differences between those personally recruited by Lao Ai and those who are under the banner of the Weinan Martial Arts School.

They had existed before Lao Ai and have been a reputable organization within Qin.

Qiu Risheng has to work with Lao Ai because he had offended Lu Buwei. With the downfall of Lord Yangquan, they have to close down and stay hidden for some time. In actual fact, they are a force worth reckoning with and they

maintain close ties with the Qin military.

In an agreement with mutual benefits, they relied on Lao Ai's backing to reopen their martial arts school and Lao Ai's influence grew tremendously because of their connections.

This is only a win-win partnership without a dominant party.

They have long planned for Guoxin to come out and fight to regain the former glory of the martial arts school but even Lao Ai has been kept in the dark until the last moment.

Xiang Shaolong managed to deduce all these just by observing the different expressions of Lao Ai and Qiu Risheng.

Lu Buwei saw that Guoxin is so insistent on fighting somebody and assumed that it will be against another member of his family warriors. He was secretly glad and no matter what, he will send out Xu Shang whose sword skill is almost as good as Guan Zhongxie. Xu Shang will definitely emerge victorious and at the same time, put down the arrogance of Lao Ai and Qiu Risheng.

Full of enthusiasm, he forgot to seek Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan's advice. Lu Buwei laughed: "Mister Guo is a worthy hero indeed. May I know who do you want to challenge?"

Guoxin bowed again and his eyes swept over the different faces of the guests. His gaze finally resting on Jing Jun's face, he coldly mentioned: "I wish to seek pointers from Assistant Commander Jing."

The moment he said these words, the crowd erupted into an

uproar.

Jing Jun was initially surprised followed by extreme delight. He was about to answer the challenge when an angelic voice called out: "No way, this fight is mine!" Everyone including Guoxin looked at the speaker and was swept off their feet.

The speaker is none other Ji Yanran whose beauty is mentioned in the same breath as Qin Qing.

All the guests acknowledged that Ji Yanran is highly skilled but knowledge is just knowledge. It is hard to imagine such a fine and delicate lady can match up to a man in terms of rough fighting.

Guoxin is one of the most prominent swordsmen under Headmaster Qiu Risheng and his fame is quite widespread too. But regardless of Talented Lady's ability, her stamina and strength would be inferior to Guoxin, causing everyone to be concerned for her.

Jing Jun naturally cannot let his sister in law take this risk. Just as he was about to protest, Teng Yi restrained him.

Guoxin is feeling awkward too and stared blankly at Ji Yanran for some time before commenting with some difficulty: "Ai, Talented Lady Ji is of royal birth and status. I dared not offend you. Hei!"

Xiang Shaolong is not surprised at all with Ji Yanran's intervention. Two days ago, she had learnt about Guoxin slandering Xiang Shaolong and blew her top, promising to teach Guoxin a lesson. She will definitely not let such an

opportunity slip by.

Concurrently, he noticed Zhu Ji staring at Ji Yanran with hatred and jealousy.

All the guests kept quiet and awaited further developments.

Still maintaining her charming and leisurely appearance unlike someone who is preparing for a fight; Ji Yanran smiled sweetly at Xiang Shaolong first and slowly stood up from her seat, taking her time to walk to the centre of the hall.

Under normal circumstances, people will try to avoid looking straight at her because it is considered rude. Now, everyone is spending every second scrutinizing her and relishing her peerless beauty.

Ji Yanran first paid her respects to the hosts Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei and took off her exquisite outer robe and discarded it on the floor. Beneath her robe is her ultimate voluptuous figure in a body-hugging white warrior suit.

The crowd went wild.

Xiang Shaolong recalled the time when they were pursued by Du Bi. Du Bi had given strict orders for the live capture of Ji Yanran and Xiang Shaolong took this chance to peep at him. Like all others, Du Bi is totally fixated on Ji Yanran. Beside him, Po Hu is looking so hard that his eyeballs are nearly dropping out of their sockets. In fact, he was salivating.

Xiang Shaolong had a revelation. Regardless of their gender, everyone present is absolutely overwhelmed by Ji Yanran's



grandeur.

In her melodious voice, Ji Yanran warned: "Mister Guo should not underestimate me because of my gender or you will live to regret it. Don't say I didn't warn you beforehand. Bring me my spear."

Wu Guang who is in charge of safeguarding the Flying Dragon Spear hurriedly untied the bundle holding the spear.

After his eyes feasted on Ji Yanran's beauty, Guoxin is mesmerized too and his body became soft. He sighed: "Consider this match to be my loss. There is no way I can bring myself to attack you."

Catching the Flying Dragon Spear thrown to her by Wu Guang, Ji Yanran ignored Guoxin's remark and began twirling the spear around, creating a trail of spear shadows. She followed up with a series of spear strokes that sent spear flashes everywhere around her ever moving body. After her demonstration, she finally stopped in an attacking pose with the spear horizontally across her chest.

Thunderous cheers erupted from the crowd and even Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei are clapping hard for her.

Guoxin's face instantly turned serious.

Seeing is believing.

He finally acknowledged that Ji Yanran's reputation is not undeserved.

The members of the Weinan Martial Arts School including

Qiu Risheng exchanged looks of amazement. They had to admit that they would be in a difficult position if they are in the shoes of Guoxin. None of them has any idea on how to overcome such a potent spear skill.

Letting out a long laugh and gaining everyone's attention in the process, Po Hu addressed: "No matter who is fighting against her, this person will lose for sure. Who in this room will harden his heart to attack Talented Lady Ji with all his might!?"

Many people clapped in response, supporting Po Hu's reasoning.

Without even looking at the conceited Po Hu, Ji Yanran smiled lightly: "If this is the case, I will invite Mister Guo to block ten spear attacks from me. If I failed to defeat you by then, then you are considered the winner."

No one among the guests would want to see her injured but at the same time, everyone wanted to see her formidable skills. The hall began to cheer upon hearing her suggestion.

Teng Yi softly laughed: "Guoxin is in trouble!"

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement. If he was Guoxin and can only defend without attacking, he will be easily defeated in three strokes.

Before Guoxin has the chance to reply, Xiao Pan icily indicated: "Mister Guo is the one who ask to fight, now that a challenger has appeared, Mister Guo should not shy away. If Mister Guo cannot block the ten spear attacks, you shall

be banned for life from holding any official appointments. Mister Guo should know what to do.”

Hearing this, Qiu Risheng and his men’s faces changed colour.

People join the Weinan Martial Arts School to be trained and eventually hope to be talent-spotted and promoted to a military post. If Guoxin is banned for life, his future is as good as gone.

Everyone immediately understood that Xiao Pan is angry over Guoxin’s challenge towards Xiang Shaolong’s men. At the same time, they can feel the insufferable dominance of this future Qin Shi Huang.

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji exchanged a look and detect each other’s shock and resentment.

Because of Lao Ai, Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan are drifting further and further apart.

This time round, Lao Ai has suffered a big setback. His biggest issue now is neither Lu Buwei nor Xiang Shaolong. If he says he is not bothered by Qiu Risheng and his men, he is lying with his eyes wide open.

All these information and analysis are secretly observed and assimilated by Xiang Shaolong who is eyeing them all these time. In the future, he can use this data to create a wedge between Weinan Martial Arts School and Lao Ai.

Guoxin bowed and drew his sword with a loud JIANG! Facing Ji Yanran, he respectfully invited: “Miss Yanran, please give

me some pointers.”

Ji Yanran plainly state: “My ten spear attacks will only attack your sword and not any part of your body. Mister can do your best to defend without any reservations.”

Everyone including Guoxin was initially shocked and the feeling is soon replaced by respect. Everyone can feel Ji Yanran’s compassion.

Anyone with eyes can tell that Ji Yanran’s spear skill is something out of this world. Moreover, the spear is a long weapon that can be used to attack the enemy from a distance. Due to the strong attacking nature of a spear, a purely-defending swordsman is at a serious disadvantage.

Guoxin may be Ji Yanran’s sworn enemy because he slandered Xiang Shaolong but because this fight concerns Guoxin’s future, Ji Yanran intentionally gave him some leeway. Guoxin can do his best to defend without guarding the vital areas of his body. Guoxin’s rate of success has greatly increased without this restriction.

From another point of view, Ji Yanran is going against Xiao Pan’s wishes and will not use this fight to make Guoxin lose his reputation and lifelong career. From this, one can conclude the independent mindset of this beauty. She will not allow anyone to violate her life principles.

At the end of the day, Guoxin and his men are not like Lu Buwei who has irreconcilable hatred with Xiang Shaolong.

Seated among the guests, Qiu Risheng’s face darkened. He

gave a cold snort and does not appreciate Ji Yanran's kindness.

On the other hand, Guoxin's face is filled with appreciation. Bowing deeply to Ji Yanran, he struck a pose and invited: "I await Miss's pointers."

The crowd turned silent in anticipation of Talented Lady Ji's first move.

Guests from the other two halls are all squeezing into the main hall to catch a glimpse of the fight. The main hall is fully crowded to the brim.

Tonight has been a night of many unexpected surprises and no one can predict what will happen next.

Ji Yanran may have 'disobeyed' Xiao Pan's wishes but she is Xiang Shaolong's wife and is one of the ladies Xiao Pan admired the most so this Crown Prince of Qin is not bothered by her leniency but is eagerly waiting for the battle to start too.

The jealousy in Zhu Ji's eyes became more significant.

Birds of a feather flock together. After Zhu Ji got together with a despicable man like Lao Ai, she is beginning to turn to the dark side.

Lu Buwei's hatred for Guoxin deepened.

Earlier, Guan Zhongxie had brilliantly salvaged the situation and put down Lao Ai's arrogance and things are proceeding smoothly. After Guan Zhongxie kills Xiang Shaolong, tonight

will be his best night ever.

With Guoxin appearing out of nowhere and instigating Talented Lady Ji into a fight, Xiang Shaolong and his men are now looking good whereas he and Lao Ai have disappeared into the shadows.

Sitting besides Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niang Rong is looking blankly at Ji Yanran and she felt an unexplained sense of loss. Under the table, Guan Zhongxie's hand snaked over undetected and held onto her tender hand.

Lu Niang Rong was shaken. In her mind, she imagined that this will probably be the hand that will kill Xiang Shaolong and could not help but turned her head towards Xiang Shaolong. She could tell that he is staring at his attractive wife with deep love and is totally unconcerned about herself. Feeling even more despair, she wrenched her hand from Guan Zhongxie's grasp.

DANG! The sound of the sword and spear clashing resonated throughout the hall.

Talented Lady Ji had finally attacked.

Like a lightning bolt, the long spear shot out from Ji Yanran's hand and it is flying in the direction of Guoxin's face, albeit higher. The spearhead flew past Guoxin's hair bun, indicating the beginning of the fight.

If Guoxin can make a guess about Ji Yanran's first attack, he will think that based on her agile spear play, she will try to trick him with some false moves, forcing him to be unable to

defend himself properly and retreat accordingly. When he retreats backwards, he will lose the strong support of his feet to meet the spear attack head on.

As a matter of fact, Ji Yanran's earlier demonstration has left a strong impression in Guoxin's mind, teaching him that a simple and straight spear can have many attacking variations.

Ji Yanran's Flying Dragon Spear is different from other spears mainly because it is entirely made of best quality steel and does not have the spring effect of normal wooden spears. The spear is also heavier and cannot be easily cut into two. During a piercing attack, the speed can be incredibly fast with the support of its heavy weight. Since Guoxin is defending, he expected a devastating first attack. He did his best to defend himself and when he discovered that the blow wasn't as strong as he expected, he was filled with fear and panic. In the split second, he steadied his horse stance and swung his sword up, clashing with the spear.

Guan Zhongxie is secretly overjoyed and he focused all his attention on this special spear skill.

It is well known that Xiang Shaolong is not well versed with the spear. If he is using the spear to fight Guan Zhongxie, it is natural that he will have to learn his spear skills from Talented Lady Ji. This is a rare opportunity for Guan Zhongxie to witness and understand her spear skill and it is as good as watching Xiang Shaolong in battle. When he finds a weakness in the spear skill, he can make use of it to gain

victory.

Although Guoxin's sword has flown up and made contact with the spear, he continued to feel helpless about his situation.

This is something totally illogical but logical too.

The long spear was deflected and it flew up a little.

Under such a situation, Guoxin should make use of Ji Yanran's proximity to attack since the close distance between them has eroded the advantage of the long weapon. However, Guoxin can only defend so he can only let this opportunity slip by.

Under the gaze of over a thousand pairs of eyes, Ji Yanran employed a special footwork and twisted her waist, quickly retrieving the Flying Dragon Spear. When she held onto the spear again with both hands, she sent the spear flying out again using the strength from her horse stance.

Due to his wrong estimation of the earlier attack, Guoxin's long sword is still suspended in mid air from the strong momentum. He became the slower person to fully control his weapon while the Flying Dragon Spear is shooting towards him like a poisonous snake, aiming for his sword sheath.

Finally comprehending the might of Ji Yanran's spear skill, Guoxin was forced to step back and sideways to avoid losing.

The crowd went mad with cheers except for Lao Ai's men and Weinan Martial Arts students who are sitting there in



silence. All the guests are rooting for Ji Yanran. Jing Jun, Wu Yan Zhu, Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong and all their followers are shouting themselves hoarse.

Gazing at this attractive and enticing beauty, Xiang Shaolong felt exceedingly proud and satisfied to be her husband and he was utterly inebriated.

Even he did not expect Guoxin to falter as early as the second spear attack.

There was a lovely smile on Ji Yanran's face which makes others feel at ease but the spear in her hands is certainly unfriendly. Under her quick steps, the piercing spear changed directions and is now attacking an empty spot on Guoxin's right.

Everyone including Guoxin was taken aback, not understanding the reason behind such a bizarre attack.

Beyond comprehension, Ji Yanran took another two steps forward and placed the body of the spear tightly against her waist. Her body begin to spin around speedily and using the power of rotation, the piercing spear attack became a sweeping attack. Again, the target is Guoxin's sword sheath.

If Guoxin is hit by the sweeping attack, he will surely fall flat on his face but there will be no major injuries so Ji Yanran is not breaking her promise.

The crowd is simply mesmerized.

Every one of Ji Yanran's spear attack is unpredicted yet pleasing to the eye.

The fluid movements of her body and her relentless energy captivated everyone.

Guoxin had lost out on the first two strokes and had wanted to fight Ji Yanran face on, relying on his manly strength to counter her feminine blow. This is the best way for him to match her ever-powerful spear attacks.

But faced with the overpowering rotation strength of her sweeping attack, Guoxin can only abandon this idea and react accordingly. His long sword sliced down from the top towards the Flying Dragon Spear. At the same time, he had to take another step back.

When the two weapons are about to make contact, the Flying Dragon spear abruptly bounced up and transformed into a multitude of several agile spear images. Like a tsunami, the spear images crushed down towards Guoxin's face.

Even an expert like Guan Zhongxie has to concede that this spear skill is truly awesome. The others are cheering even louder for Ji Yanran. The whole hall is reverberating with the mad shouts and wild cheering of her supporters and the atmosphere has reached a feverish pitch.

DANG! Guoxin is considered skilful enough to pick out the real spear among all the spear images and flashes. However, he had to change his sword movement to block the spear and his strength is limited. After the clash, he was forced to take another step back and his arm is numb with pain.

By now, Ji Yanran has attacked four times and Guoxin has

been at a disadvantage every time. Strictly speaking, he has failed to appropriately defend himself. He may have yet to lose the fight but all his reputation has gone down the drain.

Guoxin secretly thought that if this carries on, he will surely lose hold of his sword after another two blows. Gritting his teeth, he hurriedly retreated to a spacious corner of the open area.

The crowd jeered noisily at his cowardice.

But this is the best way out for him.

Ji Yanran has the fight completely under her control and is toying around with Guoxin. The last resort for him is to retreat away from the attacking range of the spear and consolidate his strength and maintain his horse stance. Simultaneously, he can let his numb and tortured hand get a quick rest.

Letting out a shrill cry, Ji Yanran rolled forward and with her left hand holding tightly to the end of the Flying Dragon Spear, she used the force generated by the spear head against the floor to spring up, following the retreating Guoxin like a shadow and aiming for his sword sheath.

The top experts like Guan Zhongxie, Han Jie and Xu Shang were full of admiration. It was noteworthy that by using the strength of the spear against the floor, Ji Yanran managed to make the impossible possible.

This attack will not hurt Guoxin but once the sword sheath is hit, he is considered to have lost the fight.

Guoxin is completely bowled over. At his wits' end, he desperately made a back flip.

Everyone knew that he has already lost the fight. When Ji Yanran sprang up from the floor, the fumbling Guoxin can only hatefully await the next spear attack to end his livelihood.

Qiu Risheng and his men could not bear to watch any further.

The reputation of Weinan Martial Arts School has been eradicated. In the future, no one will trust them as the premier swordsmen training institute of Qin. Just when Guoxin has given up resisting, Ji Yanran stood still with the spear behind her back, her aura changing from a strong attacker to a silent onlooker. Coupled with her calm and laid-back disposition, she had everyone infatuated.

After landing on the floor, Guoxin took another three steps back and held his sword at chest level. His chest is rising and falling very quickly as he stared at his gorgeous opponent with astonishment.

This unparallel beauty is still going strong and steady. She smiled: "I have attacked five times and Mister has defended five times. I have been gaining the upper hand as Mister has kept his word and did not counterattack at all. Why don't we end our fight here and declare it a draw?"

Xiao Pan stood up clapping and laughed: "Talented Lady Ji indeed. I am fully convinced by your capabilities and from this day onwards, you will be my Grand Tutor."

Turning to Guoxin, he proclaimed: "Mister Guo has followed my orders and defended himself well without attacking. This is not something easy to achieve. I hereby promote you to be the third Assistant Imperial Cavalry Commander under Commander Xiang."

A delighted Ji Yanran and a guilty-looking Guoxin knelt down to give their thanks.

Xiang Shaolong is filled with wonder and comfort at the same time.

Xiao Pan has finally grown up. Not only has he been able to see through the gains-seeking partnership of Weinan Martial Arts School and Lao Ai, he can control his emotions and employ such a unique method to pull Guoxin to his side. This is not something any man can easily accomplish.

Nobody expected the fight to have such a happy ending. Loud cheers are heard from all four corners of the hall and everyone is cheering for Ji Yanran.

The people were chanting "Talented Lady" without any rest.

Only Qiu Risheng still has an ugly expression on his face and ferociousness in his eyes. He remained silent.

Also full of hatred, Lu Buwei secretly thought that as long as Xiang Shaolong is killed, the rest don't really matter. Standing up again, he loudly laughed: "I think it is time for the main dish."

The thousand over guests quietened down at once and turned their attention to this powerful Qin official.



## CHAPTER 11

## Clash of the Titans 2

[Translated by JUSTIN13]

LU BUWEI was slightly hesitant to announce the commencement of the duel between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie. To him, it is as good as announcing the death of Xiang Shaolong. Like a bolt from the blue, Lu Niang Rong jumped up from her seat and firmly declared: "There is no need to compete any more. I have decided to disappoint Official Xiang and marry Zhongxie."

The moment she finished her words, Lu Buwei's smile was erased from his face.

Guan Zhongxie was thoroughly shaken and his eyes were shining brightly, looking at Xiang Shaolong who is staring at Lu Niang Rong with shock. This normally composed man has evidently lost his bearings.

All the guests are exchanging looks of surprises with one another.

In this case, the widely anticipated battle is as good as cancelled.

Disappointment is written all over the faces of Du Bi and Lao Ai because they will only stand to gain regardless of the duel result.

Ying Ying, Lord Changping, Wang Ci and the others can feel a huge burden off their chests as they sighed with relief.

Qin has strict laws prohibiting private duels between military commanders and both Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie are military commanders. Even Xiao Pan who wanted Xiang Shaolong to kill Guan Zhongxie had to stick to this rule and suffer the disappointment. If he insisted on their duel, it will be impossible to enforce this law in the future. The banquet hall is momentarily silent.

Lu Niang Rong sat down in her seat with her head lowered. Her chest is rising up and down very quickly, betraying her emotional state.

After staring at Lu Niang Rong for some time, Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be angry or amused. He acknowledged that he had offended her earlier so she is now



retaliating by making him lose face in front of everyone by using her marriage as an excuse.

At the end of the day, just like Ying Ying, she favours Guan Zhongxie.

Lu Buwei is so incensed his face has turned completely red. Staring viciously at Lu Niang Rong briefly, he rolled his eyeballs and sat down with a chuckle. To Xiao Pan sitting on his right, he sighed: "Kids can never make up their mind but since I had given my word, I think I should decide or I would be deceiving the world. What does Crown Prince think?"

Lu Niang Rong trembled strongly and raised her head. Just as she was about to say something, Guan Zhongxie grabbed her hand below the table and whispered into her ear: "Niang Rong should stop making things difficult for Premier Mentor."

Lu Niang Rong was stunned and secretly peeped at Xiang Shaolong before lowering her head again.

Xiao Pan calmly replied: "Premier Mentor's words cannot be taken lightly indeed. Moreover, it is common for people to choose a spouse by holding a martial arts competition. If Premier Mentor believes that the fight should not be cancelled and Empress has no objections; I will fully support your decision."

Everyone's gaze fell onto Zhu Ji, awaiting her reply. The tension in the air is like a drawn bow.

The every-powerful Empress of Qin has complicated

emotions shining from her eyes. She took a good look at Lao Ai before shifting her gaze to Xiang Shaolong. Her face suddenly losing colour rapidly, she lowered her head and proclaimed: "As Premier Mentor has recommended, the duel between Subject Guan and Subject Xiang shall proceed as normal."

The air is filled with loud cheering as the atmosphere began to resume the earlier enthusiasm.

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart being sliced into two, knowing that between him and Lao Ai, Zhu Ji has unreservedly dedicated her entire future to Lao Ai.

Whoever that understands Guan Zhongxie's ability will believe that Xiang Shaolong will lose without question. Zhu Ji's support of the duel is as good as wishing Guan Zhongxie to eliminate Xiang Shaolong once and for all.

He can only accept fate now that his relationship with Zhu Ji has deteriorated to such a state. Lu Buwei energetic laughter rang out and he barked: "Let the duel begin!"

The hall broke out into ear-splitting cheers and applause.

The drumbeats sounded again, adding to the liveliness.

After comforting Lu Niang Rong softly, Guan Zhongxie rose from his seat and the crowd quietened down at once.

Just by simply standing up, this super swordsman whose fame is only second compared to Xiang Shaolong exudes an aura of arrogance, earning the respect and fear of everyone.

Stepping out of his seat, Guan Zhongxie carried a smile as he enjoyed the cheering and scrutiny of the crowd. Reaching the centre of the stage, he stood still at ease and bowed to the hosts: "It is my happiest moment in life to exchange pointers with Official Xiang. I will die with no regrets."

Hearing his valiant words and his indifferent attitude towards death, the crowd became even more roused and were clapping madly and shouting at the top of their voices.

Xiang Shaolong had an ugly expression on his face. It is not so much about the fight but the pain he is undergoing from Zhu Ji's change of heart.

The guests mistook it for fear and were baffled.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and suppressed his surging emotions before standing up.

He realised that he has been heavily affected by Zhu Ji's 'severing' of relationship.

Xiang Shaolong is someone who values true friendship and relationships. For his friends, he is willing to forsake anything. It is because of this quality that he has won the unwavering trust of Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, Han Chuang and Tu Xian.

Despite his support for Xiao Pan, his devotion to Zhu Ji is strong too. But all he got in return for his dedication is her heartlessness, making him feel that life is meaningless.

Under the gaze of the entire hall, he walked towards Guan Zhongxie and stopped a distance away. After paying his

respects to the hosts, he looked straight at Zhu Ji's face.

After their eyes met, Zhu Ji instantly lowered her head.

Converting his sorrow into strength, Xiang Shaolong vigorously laughed: "Bring my sabre!"

Hearing the word 'Sabre', everyone was dumbfounded. Guan Zhongxie trembled strongly on the spot and he looked at Xiang Shaolong with his sharp eyes.

Jing Shan walked out and kneeled down, presenting the Hundred Battle Sabre in its sabre scabbard.

Xiang Shaolong took the sabre from him and held it in his left hand.

Cries of surprise can be heard among the guests as everyone is trying to catch a glimpse of the strange looking weapon.

Even Xiao Pan was curious: "What is the weapon Subject Xiang is holding?"

Holding his sabre, Xiang Shaolong was rejuvenated on the spot as he fully abandoned all the negative emotions related to Zhu Ji. Brimming with heroism, he vociferously replied: "This is a new weapon I designed myself. It is named Hundred Battle which is taken from Hundred Battles; Hundred Victories proverb from Sun Zi's Art of War."

The guests began to discuss among themselves and could not wait for him to draw his weapon out of the scabbard for a good look.

However, Xiang Shaolong did not have the least intention of

doing so.

Lu Buwei was blown away: “Didn’t Shaolong say you will fight using the Flying Dragon Spear? Why are you breaking your promise?”

Lord Changping laughingly interceded: “Premier Mentor has misunderstood. All military books advocate ever-changing tactics to take the enemy by surprise every time. Shaolong said that he would use a spear is to cover up his intention to use a sabre and it is an appropriate military strategy. Why did Premier Mentor say he is breaking his promise?”

Lord Changping’s words are firm and steady, stirring up a special emotion among those present.

Lord Changping may be the Left Premier but he lacks the experience and has always been slighted by others. He knows that he lacks the ability as well and dared not be too outspoken and maintained a low profile. Presently, he spoke out righteously and took the initiative to shield Xiang Shaolong. This shows that he is gradually gaining more confidence to assume his rightful position and contend with Lu Buwei.

Xiao Pan would definitely support Lord Changping. He smiled: “Left Premier is right. Official Xiang has created this extraordinary weapon and even I cannot wait to see what it is. If Premier Mentor has nothing to add, I will announce the commencement of the duel.”

Suppressing his anger, Lu Buwei swore to go after Lord Changping after Xiang Shaolong has been killed. He solemnly

agreed: "Crown Prince, please go ahead!"

Shifting his view to the Hundred Battle Sabre Scabbard in Xiang Shaolong's left hand, a pleased Xiao Pan proclaimed: "Begin!" The drums are sounded again.

Everyone began to tense up.

Xiang Shaolong's supporters who did not know about the power of the Hundred Battle Sabre are so nervous their hearts seem to be stuck in their throats.

First, they have no confidence in this new and strange weapon; Second, Xiang Shaolong is known for his sword skills. With this new weapon, he will need to devise a different fighting style and given the short time he has to practise, it is indeed an unwise decision.

Po Hu is the happiest man in the hall. If the duel is called off, at the most, he will have to refund all the gamblers but if Xiang Shaolong wins, he will suffer a huge loss because of Wu Yingyuan exorbitant bet. Seeing that Xiang Shaolong is introducing a new and strange weapon to fight the highly skilled Guan Zhongxie, he was utterly thrilled.

Since ancient times, the sword has been used as a primary weapon and has an irreplaceable status in the minds of everyone. Every warrior would know how to handle a sword first and the sword fighting culture is deeply embedded in society. This is a kind of mindset that nobody can change in a short while.

Except for Ji Yanran and those who knows about the

Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiao Pan has the most confidence in Xiang Shaolong. His hero-worship for Xiang Shaolong has begun since he was a child and there is nothing that can convince him otherwise.

The other person who dared not underestimate the Hundred Battle Sabre is Xiang Shaolong's opponent, Guan Zhongxie.

From his acute senses as a top expert swordsman, he can detect the strong confidence and powerful aura that is emitting from Xiang Shaolong the minute he held onto the Hundred Battle Sabre.

The drums gradually stopped.

The banquet hall is completely noiseless except for the sounds of heavy breathing or occasional coughing.

By now, every guest has squeezed themselves into the main hall and there are even people sitting in between the tables.

Both men slowly turned around and faced each other.

Holding onto Longstrike sword sheath, Guan Zhongxie bowed: "Official Xiang is full of surprises every time and you never fail to interest me. Regardless of the duel outcome, I am full of admiration for you."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a sensation from the sabre scabbard.

The scabbard containing the number one sabre of China is no ordinary scabbard. It contains chromium alloy which Uncle Qing formulated. It will not rust and can even be used

as a blocking weapon. Guan Zhongxie has no idea about this but Xiang Shaolong will not hide this fact from him too. He smiled back: "Official Guan must be careful. My Hundred Battle Sabre Scabbard can double up as a weapon too."

His eyes flashing with mixed emotions, Guan Zhongxie nodded: "Thanks for reminding me. Please give me some pointers."

Grinning from the corner of his mouth, Xiang Shaolong glimpsed briefly at Lao Ai's men. Han Jie is looking at him so seriously as if he is the one fighting Guan Zhongxie.

A table away, Lu Niang Rong's face is filled with despair and she is looking at them with panic in her eyes. When she caught Xiang Shaolong looking at her, her lips quivered slightly but she did not shy away from his glance.

Finally resting his eyes back on Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Are you ready?"

Guan Zhongxie took three steps back and with a JIANG! He drew Longstrike sword and adopted an attacking stance with the sword diagonally across his chest and the sword tip pointing at Xiang Shaolong.

A gust of strong killing aura instantly enveloped the entire hall and filled everyone's mind with fear and danger.

JIANG! His eyes shining like electricity, Xiang Shaolong stared hard at Guan Zhongxie. At the same time, he leaned forward slightly and partially drew out the Hundred Battle Sabre. The bright flash of the sabre created an immense fighting



pressure that seems to totally surround Guan Zhongxie.

Everyone stopped breathing in anticipation of an earth-shattering fight.

Xiang Shaolong bellowed: "Official Guan, please!" His eyes turning even sharper, Guan Zhongxie seriously replied: "Official Xiang, please!"

Others may be thinking that Guan Zhongxie is being modest but only Xiang Shaolong understands that he is not familiar with the might of the Hundred Battle Sabre and has decided to defend first, countering movement with stillness.

In a low voice, Xiang Shaolong warned: "The Hundred Battle Sabre never loses. Official Guan, please be careful."

JIANG! The Hundred Battle Sabre finally left its scabbard but not many people are able to see how it looks like.

Nobody has expected this Hundred Battle Sabre to be so domineering.

Even Teng Yi and the rest who have fought against this sabre before could not imagine the sabre to have such an overwhelming effect when used to fight with all of Xiang Shaolong's might.

As everyone look on, the Hundred Battle Sabre exited the scabbard like a flash of rainbow and with Xiang Shaolong's swift advance, it transformed into a lightning attack. The distance between the two men disappeared as the sabre chopped down heavily on Guan Zhongxie.

All the guests were amazed by the attack but yet nobody cry out.

Guan Zhongxie was taken aback at he did not expect an all out first attack from Xiang Shaolong. Shifting a step to his side, he steadied his horse stance and met his blow head on with his own sword.

DANG! The clashing sound resonated throughout the hall.

The whistling sound of the sabre cutting through the air has everyone captivated. When the two weapons met, Guan Zhongxie's body was terribly shaken along with the loud clashing sound. He may have successfully parried Xiang Shaolong devastating blow but it is something that is definitely not easy.

This chopping attack has been executed with every single effort of Xiang Shaolong, creating a terrifying aura. However, the disadvantage is that he cannot follow up quickly with a second blow.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed too and had assumed that this chop can make Guan Zhongxie move back by at least half a step. However, Guan Zhongxie managed to stay rooted to the spot and absorb the impact of his first blow.

Guan Zhongxie's martial arts have indeed improved vastly. No wonder people who are close to him have been trying to dissuade Xiang Shaolong from fighting him.

Based on Guan Zhongxie's high level of fitness, it is really hard for him to become even better. For him to reach this

new level of fitness, Xiang Shaolong is the main reason. Without Xiang Shaolong as a motivation and a form of competition, Guan Zhongxie will never reach his current peak.

After utilising all his strength, Guan Zhongxie managed to block Xiang Shaolong's attack. He thought that he will be in danger if Xiang Shaolong continued with more blows like this. Now that Xiang Shaolong has yet to recover, he made use of his body weight and pushed back at Hundred Battle Sabre with Longstrike Sword.

AO! The friction between the sabre and the sword created an annoying noise. Ultimately, Xiang Shaolong's arm strength is inferior to Guan Zhongxie's and was pushed two steps back.

Ji Yanran and the others lost some colour on their faces. Making full use of this advantage, Guan Zhongxie withdrew Longstrike sword and made another attack at Xiang Shaolong's exposed left side. At the same time, he shifted sideways and exited the attacking range of the Hundred Battle Sabre.

Moreover, Guan Zhongxie is a left-handed swordsman and he has the advantage in terms of angle, speed and strength. He is in a superior position.

Just as Xiang Shaolong's supporters could not bear to look any further and those who hate him or gambled that he will lose are getting ready to go wild with happiness, JIANG! Using his left hand holding the scabbard, Xiang Shaolong

executed a Mozi “Defending Attack” move and successfully blocked Guan Zhongxie’s killing strike with plenty of energy leftover, forcing Guan Zhongxie to retreat with astonishment.

No matter which side they are on, everyone was stunned at Xiang Shaolong’s unexpected move.

Blocking an attack using a scabbard is nothing new but for Xiang Shaolong to use his left hand to block the attack with his scabbard as if it was a weapon is something new and refreshing. There has never been any precedent.

This is a wonder strategy that Xiang Shaolong thought of recently to cover up Hundred Battle Sabre’s weakness at defending. Of course, if his opponent is not Guan Zhongxie, Hundred Battle Sabre’s forceful attack would have been sufficient to overcome them. But in the earlier scenario, the Hundred Battle Scabbard would serve as an additional protection.

Mozi Swordplay is the best defensive swordplay in the world and it will be a waste not to use it. This swordplay can still be performed by using the Hundred Battle Scabbard.

And this is also possible because chromium has been used in making the scabbard.

All these conditions have resulted in the present Hundred Battle Sabre Play.

Among all the swordsmen Guan Zhongxie has ever fought, only Xiang Shaolong is able to force him to retreat in the last

battle and the present one. He was groaning inside when a flash of sabre appeared in front of his eyes. Like a tsunami, they Hundred Battle Sabre is crushing down on him with ferocity.

DANG! DANG! The sounds of clashing filled the ears of everyone.

Xiang Shaolong began executing his full set of sabre play. In the blink of an eye, he had chopped seven consecutive times at Guan Zhongxie and every chop is performed with the best angle and in the best direction. The chops are swift as lightning strikes and the whistling of the sabre is piercing to the ear. As both weapons continued to clash, given Guan Zhongxie's ability, he was able to maintain his position but can only defend himself from this amazing sabre attacks that has incorporated science and the essence of martial arts all over the world.

Finally, the crowd went wild with their cheering.

The ones who shouted the loudest are the Tian Sisters and the Guardians. They are simply star-struck.

Even top experts like Han Jie and Xu Shang's faces lost colour after witnessing Xiang Shaolong's dominating attacks.

The worst of them is Po Hu. He could not imagine that Xiang Shaolong is a hundred times better than rumoured.

Every time the Hundred Battle Sabre clash with Longstrike sword, Longstrike sword would be deflected slightly, providing a small opening. At the same time, Guan Zhongxie

will be shaken by the blow and his steadiness is gradually decreasing.

By the time Guan Zhongxie blocked the seventh blow, he can more or less understand Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battle Sabre Play. Every chop actually has a weakness but because the chop is too fierce, overwhelming and unpredictable, there is no way he can counter attack.

This is the difference between swords and sabres. A normal sword can defend well but when up against a chopping sabre, moreover it is a newly invented weapon, even Guan Zhongxie would be caught unprepared and be at a huge disadvantage.

The Hundred Battle Sabre is like a combination of a snowstorm and a thunderstorm, manifesting countless flashes of sabre around both men. Every single chop will approach Guan Zhongxie in the most unpredictable direction and angle.

Xiang Shaolong has transformed into an all-powerful mighty immortal and performed his Hundred Battle Sabre Play to its best. He focused primarily on merciless attacks and did not have to worry about any counter attacks.

If Guan Zhongxie can somehow retaliate, the scabbard will be used to block him with Mozi Swordplay.

The observers can only feel that the sabre play is like a flock of grazing sheep that will go wherever they please. There is neither a beginning point nor an ending point of each chop.

Guan Zhongxie who is on the receiving end of the chops know it better than anyone else.

DANG! Another loud clashing sound rang out. Using his full abilities, Guan Zhongxie blocked another blow from Xiang Shaolong but could not take the blow any more. He staggered two steps backwards and his footwork is in a mess.

Xiang Shaolong knows that this is the moment he has been waiting for. With a loud howl, he took three steps forward, trailing Guan Zhongxie like a shadow. Raising the sabre above his head, he chopped down heavily at the third step towards Guan Zhongxie's forehead.

Still as composed as ever, Guan Zhongxie could not retreat in time and used his sword to block the attack as a last resort.

DANG! The sword and the sabre clashed again.

Unable to withstand the blow, Longstrike Sword was broken into two and just as Hundred Battle Sabre is approaching his forehead, Guan Zhongxie displayed his top martial arts and shifted his head aside.

Sighing, Xiang Shaolong retrieved his sabre and did not attack anymore.

Guan Zhongxie staggered another step back, grasping onto his broken Longstrike sword. A trail of blood can be seen on his forehead which is caused by the sabre energy.

The sounds of cheering died down.

Both men exchanged looks.

Time seems to have stop.

After some time, Guan Zhongxie threw away his broken sword and smiled helplessly. He bowed: "Official Xiang's Hundred Battle Sabre is truly extraordinary. I admit defeat."

He did not praise Xiang Shaolong for his skills but only praised the Hundred Battle Sabre, indicating that he had lost in terms of weaponry and does not fully submit to Xiang Shaolong. But this is indeed a true fact.

Amidst the thunderous applause, Xiao Pan and the others could not help but secretly sighed. If not for the Longstrike Sword breaking into two, Guan Zhongxie will be a lifeless corpse by now.

Lu Buwei is green with shock and he sat there in silence.

There is no more trace of blood left in Lu Niang Rong's face as she stared at both men with a lost expression.

Xiao Pan secretly peeped at Zhu Ji who is maintaining a wooden look. He then smiled: "This fight is truly awesome. Grand Tutor Xiang's invention of the Sabre and Sabre play is so amazing."

Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie hurriedly paid their respects to Xiao Pan.

Unconsciously, everyone's gaze turned to Lu Buwei, wondering if he will announce the marriage between Lu Niang Rong and Xiang Shaolong.



Just as Lu Buwei was fumbling, Zhu Ji dryly coughed and coldly questioned: "This duel may be hedging on Niang Rong's marriage but they are not literally fighting over her. I suppose we can do away with the marriage agreement. What does Shaolong think?"

Of course Xiang Shaolong will not object. He nodded: "As per Empress decision."

Wang Ci stood up and walked out of the seating area. Coming to Xiang Shaolong, he took the Hundred Battle Sabre from him and scrutinized the weapon closely. After some time, he faced Xiao Pan and reported: "It is not an easy feat for Shaolong to create such a fearsome weapon. During a cavalry skirmish, this will greatly benefit our armies' attacking power. This is a great merit with far-reaching effects and is even better than conquering a city. This is considered a military contribution. I recommend that Shaolong be promoted to be a Great General and be in charge of training the three armies. At the same time, he can oversee the Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry, Imperial Infantry and protect the Royal Family. Will the Crown Prince please approve."

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's expression became very ugly at the same time but they could not intervene as given Wang Ci's status and his reasonable explanation, there is no reason for objection.

Xiao Pan was overjoyed and nearly wanted to run towards Wang Ci and hug him, showing his appreciation. After all,

Wang Ci had mentioned exactly what Xiao Pan was trying to implement. Pleased, he replied: "My sentiments exactly. Will Empress please approve."

Zhu Ji was flustered and looked at Lao Ai before gritting her teeth and replying in a deep voice: "Shaolong deserves to be a Great General but regarding the control of the three Xianyang armies is something that needs to be considered thoroughly."

Xiao Pan was cursing inside as Wang Ci suggestion was brilliant. By making Xiang Shaolong in charge of all the armies in Xianyang City, there is no fear of any rebellions. With this suggestion, Zhu Ji cannot reject both ideas so no matter what, she must still give face and at least make Xiang Shaolong a Great General. Xiao Pan may be feeling hateful but was powerless too. He proceeded to announce that Xiang Shaolong has been immediately promoted to Great General Xiang.

The guests are generally happy at the outcome. However, Po Hu who has suffered a huge loss can only stare blankly at the delicious food in front of him without any appetite.

Xiang Shaolong has begun receiving congratulatory toasts from everyone while Xiao Pan announced the Spring Festival Prayers to be held five days later at River Wei. His announcement causes everyone to momentarily forget about the effects of the earlier duel.

Noticing a disillusioned Po Hu whispering to Du Bi, Xiang Shaolong could not help but ask his father-in-law Wu

Yingyuan how much he betted on his victory.

Holding back his laughter, Wu Yingyuan had a good look at the crestfallen Po Hu before whispering: "Only three thousand taels of gold!"

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck.

To an ordinary man, a hundred taels of gold can allow the entire family to live comfortably for their lifetime. Three thousand taels of gold is an astronomical amount. With the odds of three-for-one, even a tycoon like Po Hu will be severely affected.

The banquet is coming to a close and Lu Buwei personally sent Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji to the main door. After they left, everybody began to relax and offer their congratulations to Xiang Shaolong. Guan Zhongxie and Lu Niang Rong have quietly slipped away.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun took this break to leave first and prepare themselves for the Qi ambush.

As the guests gradually took their leave, under the company of Wu Yingyuan, Wang Ci, Wang He, Lord Changping, Huan Yi and the others, Xiang Shaolong left for the main door too. Ji Yanran, Qin Qing and the other girls followed closely behind him.

Lord Changping smiled: "From my deductions, there will not be many people who will dare to challenge Shaolong in the future."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled. Back in the 21st century, all

the wuxia novels, movies and drama serials will have a male protagonist who is the best fighter but will be plagued by countless troubles. He hopes he will be an exception.

## CHAPTER 12

## The Assassin in the Starry Night

[Translated by REN WO XING]

XIANG SHAOLONG, Ji Yanran, and the other women rode to a place a few streets just outside the Wu family manor, meeting Teng Yi and several dozen crack troopers who were waiting for them there.

They all dismounted.

Teng Yi walked next to Xiang Shaolong. In a low voice, he said: "Our people have seized the advantage by taking strategic hiding spots prior to the arrival of the assassination squad which Tian Dan sent. We know exactly where our

enemies are emplaced. Shaolong, do you wish to exterminate them all? Or shall we do our best to take as many alive as possible."

Xiang Shaolong stared hard at the deep, dark alleyways. One of them had ancient, towering trees on both sides, making it look especially gloomy and hidden. This was the best place for the opponent to ambush them.

Xiang Shaolong said in a deep voice: "Second Brother, what are your thoughts?"

Teng Yi said: "To capture them alive would require only that we exert a bit more effort. We have many times their number of people, and so we can wait for them to flee when they realize that they have been discovered before springing our trap on them. Jing Jun has already deployed a squad of five hundred horsemen nearby, ready to assist us. I can guarantee that no one will escape."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "We'll do it as Second Brother suggests. Tian Dan, that sly fox, really is formidable. Right after returning to Qi, he immediately sent this assassination squad to Xianyang. And, due to Lu Buwei's protection, we've only discovered their existence just now. From this, we can tell that there are critical, glaring gaps in our intelligence. After we deal with the situation, we must come up with a way to close the gaps."

Teng Yi nodded in response: "Let's go!"

Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, and the Eighteen Guardians followed Teng Yi and his men, swiftly traversing the dimly lit

alleyway. Quite soon, they arrived at the section where the assassins lay in ambush.

Aside from the entrance to the street, which was lit by two large lanterns, the only light throughout the street was the silvery light of the moon, giving it an aura of desolate beauty.

Xiang Shaolong pressed himself against Ji Yanran's and whispered into her ear: "Today, the Learned Lady has really displayed her awe-inspiring majesty!"

Ji Yanran pressed her fragrant, jade-like face against his lips, happily cooing, "Can it compare to milord husband? But the Hundred Battles Sabre is a bit too powerful, as Guan Zhongxie would have died if it hadn't snapped his sword. As the saying goes 'Going too far is as bad as not going far enough.'"

Teng Yi also thought it was funny: "How can there be such a thing as being 'too powerful'? It simply wasn't Guan Zhongxie's time to die yet. But his talent really is astonishing. He was actually able to dodge the Hundred Battles Sabre at the exact moment that his sword shattered."

At this point in time, the Eighteen Guardians and the fifty-odd crack troopers dispersed themselves, taking strategic positions on the field, even clambering up onto trees to assume the highest strategic position. They sealed off every avenue of escape for the street.

Xiang Shaolong said in a low voice: "Only now do I realize that Guan Zhongxie intentionally allowed me to strike at an

already-damaged section of his sword. He lost his sword, but preserved his life. His foresight really is astonishing."

Ji Yanran and Teng Yi were simultaneously shocked. In a situation like that, on the verge of death, Guan Zhongxie still maintained his calm and presence of mind, using such a shocking method to preserve his life. He really was formidable.

Another person came with a report. Everything was in place, and they could make their move at any time.

Everyone waited for Xiang Shaolong's order.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "The enemies must be anxious right now. Let's wait another hour, til the point there are absolutely bewildered and frightened. That will be the best time to strike."

Teng Yi and Ji Yanran both exclaimed their approval. The former said: "If that's the case, let me order some people to go and procure some nets and ropes, so that we might capture them more easily."

As Teng Yi went to do this, Xiang Shaolong pulled Ji Yanran over to sit beneath a nearby tree. Laughing, he said: "Tonight really is a night filled with excitement and danger. Based on Lu Buwei's temperament, after having lost so much face, his desire to revolt must have grown only stronger. Fortunately, we have the ultimate backup plan of the Black Dragon. Otherwise, this really would cause a headache."

Ji Yanran stared up at the starry skies, a look of contentment



flashing across her eyes. Leaning against him, she said in a shy voice: "With milord husband here, what can Lu Buwei possibly pull off? And when it comes to marshalling troops and fighting battles, Wang Ci is even more formidable than Xu Xian and Lu Gong. As long as we can prevent him from being murdered by Lu Buwei; Lu Buwei and Meng Ao will find it very hard to openly rebel. In addition, the people of Qin's devotion to crown and country is famous throughout the world. How could Lu Buwei possibly rebel so easily? I'm actually more concerned about Du Bi and Pu Hu. In their hands, they hold Cheng Qiao, the Lord of Chang'an, as a card to be played against the Crown Prince. They might be able to use the Qin people's dislike towards Lu Buwei. Combine that with his local influence, and the instability of the three eastern provinces, and their collusion with the people of Zhao... let's hope they don't act. If they do, they will cause disaster. My dear, you must be wary of them."

Xiang Shaolong had always held the advice of this beloved wife in the highest of esteem. Nodding, he said: "Thank you, Learned Lady, for your reminder. Tomorrow, when I enter the palace, I will discuss this with the Crown Prince, Li Si, and Lord Changping. This way, if something happens, we won't be caught flatfooted."

Ji Yanran leisurely sighed. Resting her head against his broad shoulders, she said: "That which I thank the Heaven the most for is Heaven allowing me to marry you, milord, after my country and home collapsed. In the past, each time I thought about those events, I would always contemplate

ending this meaningless life of mine. Fortunately, I did not. If I had, I wouldn't have been able to experience this deadly yet beautiful night."

Xiang Shaolong reached out and embraced her fragrant shoulder. Moved, he said: "Learned Lady, you favor me with your love. I should be the one moved to tears."

Ji Yanran straightened her lovely body, as joy sparkled across her face: "This is precisely the unique characteristic of milord husband, never treating women as servants or slaves. Sister Qing must be with Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Xiao Zhen, and Xiao Feng at this moment, spending the night talking about you. No one's heart is ever away from your own."

Just as Xiang Shaolong thought to reply, a striking sound was heard as a brilliant flower of light exploded above the dark street, illuminating it.

Beneath the glare of this 'flash-bang grenade', several dozen people could be seen charging down the street.

The two rose to their feet and gave the order.

The battle began.

Instantly, the sounds of battle and killing filled their ears.

In the blink of an eye, the battle changed into a rout, with them pursuing after the fleeing targets.

In the face of Xiang Shaolong's ambush, all of the enemies were either killed, injured, or captured.

The commoners nearby were startled awake. Naturally, no

one would dare to go out and look.

The sound of hooves and men had shattered this neighborhood's tranquility.

By the time Xiang Shaolong returned to the entrance, all of the captured Qi assassins had been bound in a group and held within the Wu manor.

Jing Jun reported: "We killed twenty five and captured sixty seven. Heh, looks like the midget and the prettiest 'soft-boned' performer didn't participate in this event. As a matter of fact, there isn't a single person from Qi who we've met before that is here."

Xiang Shaolong rode into the Wu family manor. He saw that although the prisoners looked dispirited, all of them had unyielding looks on their faces. His heart sank.

How should he deal with them? Just as he was hesitating, the sound of hoof-steps from afar could be heard as Guan Zhongxie led a squad of men rushing towards them. Bowing, he said: "Sir, I came a moment too late. Please forgive my tardiness."

Xiang Shaolong and the others knew that they came with no good intentions in mind. The air immediately became tense.

Xiang Shaolong leapt off his horse and calmly said: "Nothing major. Just a group of petty thugs who had some unscrupulous designs. Master Guan, feel free to take them away. You can report your disposition of them afterwards. I hope that this will not happen again."

Aside from Guan Zhongxie, even Teng Yi, Jing Jun, and Ji Yanran were shocked.

Everyone knew that Xiang Shaolong wasn't so easily handled. They just didn't know what he was plotting.

Guan Zhongxie was stunned for a long period of time. Just as he intended to speak, Xiang Shaolong impatiently waved his hand: "Take them away. Give me a report tomorrow so that I might know if there's anyone behind their actions, and find out their histories."

Although Guan Zhongxie was still suspicious, what more could he say? He immediately ordered his men to take the assassins away, not leaving so much as a corpse behind.

When Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi strode into the main hall, Jing Jun asked curiously: "Third Brother, why did you so easily give up this opportunity to pull down Lu Buwei?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "None of these people had appeared tonight at the dance display. From this, we can tell that scoundrel Lu made preparations in advance. Even though we captured them, none of them would have revealed any connection to that traitor Lu."

Ji Yanran nodded: "Lu Buwei would be an idiot to do otherwise. Cleaning up after the disastrous early battle at our farm had already caused him a lot of headaches. Naturally, he would have learned to do better this time."

Jing Jun frowned: "But there was still no need for Third Brother to hand these people to Guan Zhongxie. If we

questioned them severely, we would at least be able to discover how these people entered Xianyang, and from there find clues to follow. It would be worth it if we could cause Lu Buwei a few more headaches."

The four sat down in the hall, as a serving girl brought them tea. The bodyguards patrolled all around them.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "The purpose of allowing Guan Zhongxie to take these murderers away is to catch him, the biggest fish of them all. We know that in tomorrow's report, Lu Buwei will have many excuses for these people. This is their long-planned out reserve strategy. That way, after dealing with me, they can still keep these people to deal with others."

Ji Yanran suddenly cried out: "Then it must be Du Bi!"

Teng Yi slapped the table and called out: "I get it now. For Guan Zhongxie to allow so many people to sneak into the city is a gross breach of his duties. I want to see how he can possibly keep his position by tomorrow."

Xiang Shaolong calmly said: "If we didn't have two marvelous chess-pieces in the form of Meng Wu and Meng Tian, I'm afraid that we still wouldn't be able to budge Guan Zhongxie from his position. But with one of them being the next Imperial Infantry Commander, why would Lu Buwei continue to fight against it? Starting from tomorrow, both of the major military commands of the city will be in my hands. It will be even more difficult for Lu Buwei to rebel."

Ji Yanran sighed in admiration: "Milord husband's

calculations are never wrong. But we must be prepared to deal with Lao Ai fighting for that position. With the Empress supporting him, he still has a chance."

Teng Yi laughed. "Then let us allow Lu Buwei to fight against him and batter each other into pieces."

At this moment, the sound of hoofsteps could distantly be heard coming from far away.

Ji Yanran happily rose to her feet: "It must be Ting Fang and the others returning!" After speaking, she stepped outside.

Jing Jun's expression became extremely excited. In a low voice, he said: "Third Brother, didn't you say that you were going to find Qiu Risheng and cause misfortune for him? It's such a fine night tonight that tomorrow must be a wonderful day as well. We can't let such a great opportunity go to waste!"

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi simultaneously burst into laughter.

Grabbing Jing Jun by the shoulder, Teng Yi said: "Kid, don't forget that tomorrow, General Xiang is going to take you to Lu Gong's family residence to formally propose marriage. All you can think about is fighting and killing."

A look of joy appeared on Jing Jun's face. He slapped himself once, blushing in acknowledgment.

At this moment, a female servant came by Xiang Shaolong's side. In a low voice, she said: "Lord, please have some tea."

Xiang Shaolong didn't think too much as he casually accepted her teacup.

Suddenly, a knife flashed.

With a flip of her left wrist and a twist of her slim waist, the serving girl pulled out a dagger which flashed with cold light, piercing it towards Xiang Shaolong's throat like a bolt of lightning.

This was totally unexpected. Xiang Shaolong fell over backwards, barely escaping this lethal blow as the teacup flew backwards as well.

With loud roars, Teng Yi and Jing Jun simultaneously jumped up. Jing Shan and the others were shocked stiff.

With another twist of her hip, the serving girl shot out another dagger as she simultaneously dodged towards the left. Her movements were fast and nimble, causing others to exclaim in admiration.

Just as Xiang Shaolong leapt to his feet, the dagger plunged into his chest. With a miserable cry, he fell back down.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun were frightened out of their wits as they threw themselves towards Xiang Shaolong.

By this time, the Guardians had already detained the assassin and began battling with her.

Supporting Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun tore open his gown at the point of the dagger's entrance, only to find that he was wearing the armored vest which Qin Qing had

personally woven for him. The dagger had only been able to penetrate the outer garments. Only then did the two let out a breath.

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. Still badly shaken, he said: "Do not kill her!"

Teng Yi roared: "Master Xiang is fine! Take her alive!"

With a shriek, the serving girl was thrown by Wu Guang to the floor.

Xiang Shaolong pulled out the dagger. Its tip was only slightly wet with blood, having barely cut through the doublet to lightly slice his skin.

The Guardians dragged the serving girl before them.

Xiang Shaolong glanced at her. Amazingly, it was the main performing girl from last night, the most beautiful soft-boned beauty.



# VOLUME 19

## CHAPTER 1

### Endless Future Troubles

[Translated by REN WO XING]

DESPITE being held prisoner under the iron hands of the indomitable Guardians, this tender, lovely girl still maintained a look of fearlessness. A look of disdain on her

face, she icily said to Xiang Shaolong: "So Master Xiang wears a set of impenetrable armor beneath his clothes. No wonder you are so bold and fearless!"

For some reason, Xiang Shaolong felt that something was out of place, but he couldn't quite figure out what the problem was.

Jing Shan and Wu Guang had each seized her by an arm and bent them behind her back. Reasonably speaking, it should be very difficult for her to make any movements at this time.

Teng Yi clearly felt the same strange feeling that he had. This man of steel was different from the likes of Jing Jun and the Guardians, whose eyes were feasting on the sight of her chest, pushed straight due to her arms being pressed against her back. He icily shouted: "Kneel!"

Jing Shan and Wu Guang pressed down hard. How could the soft-boned beauty resist? Even her beautiful, flexible legs had lost their ability to threaten anyone now.

The sound of people coming in from outside could be heard, as Ji Yanran and the rest came in as well.

Right at this moment, a thought flashed across Xiang Shaolong's mind. He realized what the problem was.

She shouldn't have been so easily seized.

Based on her skill as demonstrated at Lu Buwei's performance, it would not be an easy feat for his men to seize her and take her alive. And if she had just taken a step towards the window instead, how could the Guardians have

so easily caught her? She must have been feigning.

The reason was because she saw that he was still alive, and heard him command his men not to kill her. That was why she purposefully allowed his men to capture her, so as to make yet another attempt at assassination.

At this moment, everyone was naturally looking towards the main entrance.

Xiang Shaolong also feigned distraction.

At that moment, the soft-boned beauty took in a deep breath, then spat out. A bolt of light shot out of her mouth, streaking towards Xiang Shaolong's face.

Teng Yi and the others were caught by surprise, utterly shocked.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly dodged, slipping past the hidden weapon. The soft-boned beauty's body made a few strange contortions and somehow managed to slip away from Wu Guang and Jing Shan's grasps. Then, as slippery as a loach, she somehow threw the two away, into the midst of the company. Her movements were astonishingly fast and slick, causing all the watchers to praise her skills.

Just as everyone was shouting in anger and shock, the soft-boned beauty grabbed herself by the knees and curled up into a ball. Like a large rubber ball, she rolled next to a window in the blink of an eye. Before anyone had a chance to stop her, she shot out, flying away through the window.

The Guardians had just suffered a tremendous loss of face.

They furiously chased after her.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest exchanged amazed glances. None of them had expected that the soft-boned beauty would be so formidable. At this moment, Lords Changping and Changwen, along with Huan Yi, came rushing in, having just heard the news. The entire manor became very lively, both inside and out.

When Xiang Shaolong awoke, he felt refreshed and energetic. All of the previous night's worries had been washed clean away.

As he got out of bed, he accidentally woke up the ever-lazy-a-bed Ji Yanran. She sleepily threw herself into his embrace, cooing absent-mindedly: "It's still dark outside, isn't it? Let's sleep for a while longer."

Xiang Shaolong pulled her close. After affectionately cuddling for a time, he said: "Going forwards, I'm going to wake up before the rooster crows in order to practice the Hundred Battles Sabreplay as well as barehanded martial arts. Just by observing that soft-boned assassin, we can tell that the world contains countless numbers of skilled people. If we aren't careful, we'll suffer calamity."

When Ji Yanran recalled how that soft-boned beauty had spat a hair-thin needle out from her mouth last night, she felt a sense of lingering fear: "How astounding. She could hold a needle like that in her mouth but speak easily and normally, without raising any suspicions."

Xiang Shaolong slapped her white buttocks hard. Laughing,

he said: "Dear wife, sleep for a bit longer!"

Making a lovable face, Ji Yanran got up as well. She grumbled: "After that spank of yours, my desire to sleep has flown away."

Xiang Shaolong's gaze naturally and unconsciously fell upon the half-open neckline of her sleepware, which revealed the deep valley of her cleavage. He felt his pulse quicken, and just barely kept himself from pressing this alluring woman down against the bed. He secretly steadied himself and forced himself away.

He couldn't help but suddenly recall the warning which Li Mu had given him. If he wasn't careful, he would allow the natural lust between man and woman to entangle him, causing himself not to live up to this famous Zhao general's hopes.

Ji Yanran jumped down from the bed as well. Smiling joyfully, her face like a flower, she said: "Allow me to service Great General Xiang by bathing him and dressing him, alright?"

By the time the first rays of dawn began to peek over the horizon, Xiang Shaolong had already rushed to the Imperial Palace. Xiao Pan was in the middle of eating breakfast. When he saw him arrive, Xiao Pan hurriedly told him to join. Upon hearing Xiang Shaolong explain what had happened last night, he flew into a royal rage: "Lu Buwei, that treacherous dog. In the future, We shall make sure that he doesn't even have a burial plot! He knows that you, master, are Our most

beloved subject, and yet he still dares to act so rashly and presumptuously."

Xiang Shaolong laughed. "Crown Prince, it isn't as though you are discovering for the first time what type of person he is! Getting angry is a waste of time. It was fortunate that Meng Tian reported this to us this time. But that female assassin really is a first-rate expert."

Xiao Pan was stunned for a long moment, before suddenly laughing in spite of himself: "If anyone else had said those words, We would only be even more furious. But since you were the one to say the words, master, We....ahem, I only feel a warm feeling in my heart. I feel very comfortable. Hah! Those words of mine really were pointless. But I really don't understand why you handed those people over to Guan Zhongxie, master?"

Xiang Shaolong naturally didn't tell them that it was because he knew that they wouldn't be able to overthrow Lu Buwei in the next few years, making any attempt at doing so meaningless. Instead, he calmly said: "For an event of this magnitude to happen within the city, someone must take responsibility. Weren't we trying to come up with a suitable position for Meng Wu and Meng Tian?"

Xiao Pan's royal countenance trembled. Joy shooting from his eyes, he cried out in approval: "Master, that really is a formidable plan! Especially seeing as how last night, Guan Zhongxie was forced to submit to your sword...ahem, that is, your sabre. His prestige has taken a huge tumble. This is

what is known as... what's the proper way to describe this?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he was feeling extremely excited and so found it difficult to convey his thoughts. He completed Xiao Pan's phrase. "When he's ill, go for the kill!"

Xiao Pan slapped the table: "Just so! When he's ill, go for the kill. If even the city defense force falls into my hands, even if Lu Buwei and Lao Ai sprout three heads and six arms apiece, they won't be able to move against me."

At this moment, a servant came with the news that the ministers had been assembled for the morning court.

Exchanging grins, the two went off to attend morning court.

The great hall was filled with a solemn, stately air.

With all of the amazing events which had occurred last night, everyone present had heard at least some of the stories. Everyone felt that this affair would be difficult to wrap up.

After Xiang Shaolong was promoted to the rank of Great General, his position became much higher than it had been previously. He ranked only behind Wang He, Wang Ci, Meng Ao, and Du Bi, and so calmly seated himself besides them.

Aside from the five of them, the only other two Great Generals were Wang Jian and An Gu.

Of the three people placed at the highest position, Xiao Pan's expression looked the most vigorous. Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei, seated by his side and a little lower, both looked extremely tired. Clearly, they hadn't slept well last night.

After everyone paid their obeisance, Xiao Pan launched the first attack as he began to question Xiang Shaolong about the previous night's events.

Xiang Shaolong slowly, systematically described everything which had happened last night, then said towards Guan Zhongxie: "Official Guan, please present us with the results of your interrogation."

Guan Zhongxie, seated below Huan Yi, took a few steps forward and bowed down: "All of those thugs died from drugs they had hidden on their bodies. Afterwards, we discovered poison pills hidden in their mouths. They bit into the pills, causing the poison to enter their stomachs. By the time we discovered it, it was too late."

These words immediately caused a commotion.

Xiang Shaolong naturally didn't believe a word of it. This clearly was Lu Buwei's plan, to kill these people in order to silence them.

But there was no need for him to speak. Lao Ai, standing opposite to him, solemnly said, "Crown Prince, please guide us with your wisdom. For such a large group of men to be able to sneak into the city and attempt to assassinate a senior minister, with a careful, meticulous plot that was clearly premeditated and planned out long ago, is a serious event that cannot be easily dismissed. Not only must we seek out and pursue the mastermind behind their actions, we also must find out what weakness in our city defenses was exposed. How else can we explain the fact that so many



people snuck into our city without us knowing?"

Everyone nodded in agreement. Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan simultaneously groaned in silence.

Judging from Lao Ai's attitude, and how directly he was trying to assign blame on someone, they could tell that he and Zhu Ji had made an agreement to try and seize the position of the Imperial Infantry Commander for their own.

Lu Buwei, Guang Zhongxie, and Meng Ao also saw what Lao Ai was attempting to do. Instantly, their faces changed.

But Lord Changping hadn't quite thought things through yet. He berated Guan Zhongxie: "Official Guan, are you saying that you don't know anything about those people's origins?"

Guan Zhongxie calmly said: "I have asked for instructions from the Premier Mentor. Since the situation was strange and unusual, the Premier Mentor ordered me to fully investigate this matter before making my report to the Crown Prince."

Du Bi let out a cold harrumph: "Official Guan, after being busy for an entire night, you have nothing to report at all? Actually, just from their weapons and their clothes, you should have enough information as to pinpoint their status and origins, and to point out the person behind their actions."

Lu Buwei laughed loudly: "Great General Du's words are wise. These assassin's weapons were all forged at the

weapon foundry in Tunliu<sup>10</sup>, owned by Pu Juan<sup>11</sup>. The only reason why I didn't allow this to be reported was because I feared that others were framing him, which is why I ordered Zhongxie to make additional inquiries. But if Great General Du feels that this evidence is already sufficient and conclusive, please request the Crown Prince to issue the order and have Pu Juan immediately executed."

Du Bi's expression changed dramatically. He roared out, "That's outrageous!"

He turned towards Xiao Pan and was about to speak, but Xiao Pan calmly said: "Great General Du, calm yourself. Naturally, We know that that someone is trying to frame Mr. Pu!"

Only then did Du Bi slowly regain his former calm. He glared at Lu Buwei fiercely, but no longer spoke.

Naturally, Xiao Pan didn't feel any particular good will towards Du Bi or Pu Juan. But at this point in time, he still needed to wait for the Black Dragon to appear and for his own footing to be solidified before he could make his move against Du Bi and Pu Juan.

Otherwise, if he tried to take on too much, Lu Buwei would seize the opportunity to increase his own power and maybe even try to revolt in the ensuing chaos. In that case, the

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<sup>10</sup> Near modern Shanxi

<sup>11</sup> REN WO XING'S NOTE: In my copy, there is someone called 'Pu Juan' who appears to be the 'Po Hu' of previous chapters. The 'Juan' character appears to be badly transliterated in the online versions, so it can be any number of characters, such as 'Que', etc. As the 'Juan' character is the one I see the most, I will use 'Pu Juan'.

losses would be greater than the potential gains.

The military clique which Du Bi and Pu Juan were representing were primarily based upon popular discontent and the instability of the three eastern prefectures. If they also colluded with the country of Zhao, they would be very difficult to deal with.

Lu Buwei seized the chance to speak: "For such a group of people to enter the city to cause trouble, there clearly must be someone protecting them for them to pass the city walls. Thus, the question we should be asking is not who to assign blame to, but rather, who the mastermind is. This is similar to Lord Gaoling's attempt to rebel during the imperial hunting party. Someone must have been protecting him and covering for him the entire time. Great General Xiang, you were given orders to investigate this affair. Do you have a report for us?"

This technique of 'defending while attacking' really was formidable. The focus of attention was suddenly thrust upon Great General Xiang.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly furious that he hadn't been able to seize that soft-boned beauty from last night. If he had, he would be able to produce her and see how Lu Buwei would handle the situation.

Just as he planned to speak, Xiao Pan calmly said: "Great General Xiang, under Our orders, was investigating the matter. But halfway through, he was waylaid and pursued, causing him to miss his mark. We are in the process of

examining this matter and should have results soon."

In saying so, Xiao Pan was resting that entire affair on his own person. Lu Buwei could only awkwardly smile and had nothing else to say.

The atmosphere suddenly became extremely awkward.

If anyone else were to continue pursuing this matter and attempt to assign blame, they would be directly opposing Lu Buwei.

Although Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei were clearly on opposite, irreconcilable sides, he did not want to push the situation too far here.

Zhu Ji, who had been silent up to now, said in a soft voice: "Since the Premier Mentor feels that there is no need to assign blame over this matter, I will certainly respect his advice. But increasing the city's defenses is an important, pressing matter. I fear that Official Guan will not be able to handle this weighty responsibility by himself. The position of Assistant Infantry Commander really should no longer be left empty. Inner Custodian, you should be more familiar with city defense than any others, due to your rank. Do you have any suggestions as to who should fill this position?"

Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping, and even Lu Buwei all silently cried out in alarm. For Zhu Ji to openly ask Lao Ai his opinion on who to appoint, wasn't this clearly inviting him to appoint one of his own men and whittle away Guan Zhongxie's authority? Since Zhu Ji spoke so openly, not even Xiao Pan or Lu Buwei could openly countermand her.

Lao Ai really did do as everyone expected. He leisurely said: "This humble official has a guest named Han Jie. Before he came here, he participated in the defense of the capital of Yan. He is a rare talent. When it comes to selecting an Assistant Infantry Commander, he really would be the best choice."

Zhu Ji said: "Your suggestion is very much in line with my own thoughts. If none of the ministers present have any objections, then let it be so."

Lu Buwei said in a deep voice: "Right now, the Imperial Cavalry have three Assistant Commanders. We should also add yet another Assistant Infantry Commander as well, so that he, along with Han Jie, may better assist Guan Zhongxie in performing his duties. This old minister already has a person in mind; Xu Shang of Shangcai. With his assistance, nothing else will go wrong."

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan, Li Si, and Lord Changping's faces all dropped. None of them had imagined that things would progress to such a stage.

It was a good thing that the palace guard commander was, by tradition, a member of the royal family. Else, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai would probably try to divide that post up as well.

Wang Wen, Cai Ze, and Meng Ao immediately voiced their approval.

Since Lao Ai had already recommended Han Jie, it was now

difficult for him to oppose Lu Buwei's suggestion.

Xiang Shaolong and the others could no longer recommend Meng Wu or Meng Tian. If they did so, they would arouse Lu Buwei's suspicions and make the suggestion pointless.

In the end, the result was that Xu Shang was chosen.

Xiang Shaolong sighed in dismay, but the rice was already cooked, and there was no going back.

Not only were they unable to budge Guan Zhongxie, Lao Ai's authority actually increased. This was what was known as "Failing to steal the chicken, and losing the rice as well."

With the positions of Assistant Infantry Commander, under Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's auspices, Xu Shang and Han Jie both were in a position to secure powerful, prominent military positions. By that time, they would have endless future troubles.

After the morning court was concluded, Xiang Shaolong felt greatly dispirited. As he hurriedly left the palace, he passed by Qin Qing's residence. His heart suddenly moved, he went to go seek her. This peerless beauty was in her garden, embroidering a flower. Winter had just ended and spring had just arrived. The wind and the sun were both beautiful, and the day was warm. Qin Qing was hard at work, beneath the auspices of a lively, flourishing tree. Her plain, simple dress only accentuated her own jade-like visage, possessing an allure all her own.

Qin Qing saw that Xiang Shaolong made the time to come

visit her, despite being so busy, and felt a sense of unexpected joy. Laying down the embroidery, she slipped her hand into his and took him on a tour of the garden.

Xiang Shaolong, feeling her smooth hand, sighed: "The purpose of my trip here today is to thank Grand Tutor Qin for saving my life."

Qin Qing smiled: "You're always like this. You'd rather die than not startle others. When did I ever save your life?"

Xiang Shaolong related to her the story of how her protective vest had deflected the assassin's knife.

As Qin Qing listened, all the blood drained from her flower-like face: "How could there be such a deadly female assassin in the world? Even an expert such as Jing Shan found himself helpless against her! Oh Shaolong! I really am going to die from worry."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "No need to fret. Although it is true that the assassin was highly skilled, the primary reason she was able to escape is that most men are lecherous and are usually not on their guard against a skinny lass. That's what gave her the chance to escape. If it had been a male assassin, Jing Shan and the others would've given her several good punches right from the start and caused her face to swell up like a pig, and then would've also paralyzed her entire body. How would she have had the chance to make another attempt at assassination?"

Qin Qing was deeply amused by his words. Laughing so hard that she made the flowers tremble, she gently rested her

arm against his shoulder. Only after a long time did she manage to gasp out: "With you by my side, I'm always laughing without end! Hmph! You terrible man, you've stolen my wits from me!"

This was the first time that Xiang Shaolong had heard Qin Qing speak so candidly and expose her innermost thoughts. His heart growing warm, he pulled her into his embrace. Overjoyed, he said: "Grand Tutor Qin, please don't forget what you have promised me!"

Qin Qing raised her flower-like face towards him, a look of desire upon it: "What I promised you?...oh...I'm not talking to you about that anymore! Quickly let me go, it would be terrible if someone saw us together like this."

Xiang Shaolong's mood improved as he saw that look of lust mixed with reluctance on her face. Laughing, he said: "Grand Tutor Qin, it seems as though you finally remember that you promised me that I can do whatever I wish to you after my battle with ole' Guan. Hah! The weather is stupendous today. Why don't we..."

Qin Qing was terribly embarrassed. With a forceful push, she escaped from his clutches. Stamping her foot, she yelled: "Don't say anything else, or I'll call for my bodyguards and have you expelled!"

Xiang Shaolong roared with laughter, filled with unspeakable merriment. Opening his arms widely, he said: "My little darling, quickly come back to my arms!"

Qin Qing's ears were a fiery red. Feeling both happy and



embarrassed, there naturally was nothing she could do to him. After rolling her eyes at him, she said in a soft voice: "Would it be acceptable for me to accompany you after the Spring Sacrifices? Hey! Weren't you supposed to go with little Jun to Lu Gong's residence to propose marriage? Why are you dawdling here instead?"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that Jing Jun was impatiently waiting for him at their offices. All he could do was pull her into his arms one more time and give her a thorough groping before he left.

When he returned to his office, he found Jing Jun there fidgeting impatiently. Lord Changping and Huan Qi had arrived as well. Xiang Shaolong wanted to sit down and drink a cup of tea first, but Jing Jun grabbed him immediately. And so their entire group headed towards Lu Gong's residence.

There were many people on the street. It was both bustling and peaceful.

By this point in time, Xiang Shaolong was a person who was often spoken about by the common man in the streets. The people of Qin have always worshipped heroes. Knowing that last night, he had utterly triumphed over Guan Zhongxie, everyone was filled with the utmost admiration and pointed towards him as he passed by. When he courteously smiled at a group of young ladies who were chasing after him and staring at him, they were so mesmerized that they almost fainted.

Although Lord Changping's rank was that of the Left Premier,

his public notoriety was far lower than that of Xiang Shaolong's. Tremendously envious, he said: "Shaolong, your battle last night has shaken the entirety of Xianyang. I'm basking in your victory as well. After I went home last night, Ying Ying couldn't stop praising you. I'm terrified that she might change her mind again and come chasing after you once more, refusing to marry Duanhe."

Xiang Shaolong felt very gratified, feeling as though he had finally managed to do a big favor for this close friend of his. He casually asked about something else: "When is little Yi going to return to the palace?"

Huan Yi respectfully replied: "The Crown Prince bade me return only after the Spring Sacrifices are over. Alas! Right now, my special army's troops are not fully equipped and armored yet. There are many things that I wish to do but do not have the strength to. After this morning's court was held, Lu Buwei hunted me down to have a talk. He wanted me to accept Meng Wu and Meng Tian into my army as assistant commanders. But how could I possibly agree?"

A look of shock appeared on Xiang Shaolong's face, as well as everyone else's.

Lord Changping laughed softly: "What are you afraid of? Go ahead and satisfy him!"

Astonished, Huan Yi stared at Lord Changping.

Xiang Shaolong said in a quiet voice: "The Left Premier's words are correct. Little Wu and little Tian are both on our side."

Overjoyed, Huan Yi said: "Then my rapid-response army is saved!"

Teng Yi laughed from behind them: "Go quickly and agree to the offer!"

Just as Huan Yi was about to leave the group, Lord Changping pulled him over. He instructed: "Little Yi, if you can pretend that you are throwing in with Lu Buwei's side and joining him, the Crown Prince will be even more appreciative."

Huan Yi was not a person who was good at deception. A look of discomfort appeared on his face.

Xiang Shaolong said: "Little Yi only needs to act in accordance with his usual attitude and behavior. If you try too hard, you'll actually raise Lu Buwei's suspicions instead. Understood?"

Nodding, Huan Yi accepted the advice and joyfully departed.

As they crossed the last street, Lu Gong's residence appeared in plain sight. Jing Jun began to feel nervous and hesitant and hid himself in the back of the group.

The group roaring with laughter, Xiang Shaolong took the front and led them into the residence.

To be able to create a blissful, happy future for one's brother truly was one of the greatest delights in one's life.

## CHAPTER 2

## Distilling Spirits, Discussing Wine

[Translated by REN WO XING]

THIS NIGHT, the Wu family residence put on a magnificent feast, in honor of Jing Jun's impending marriage. As a side-benefit, they also celebrated Xiang Shaolong's fierce defeat of Lu Buwei's vile schemes.

Aside from their own people and Qin Qing, the only outsiders present were Lords Changping and Changwen, Wang He<sup>12</sup>, Wang Ling, Huan Yi, Li Si, Yang Duanhe, and a

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<sup>12</sup> REN WO XING'S NOTE: After careful review of this passage as well as Chinese history, it appears that 'Wang Ci' should be Wang He, the same Wang He mentioned when Xiang Shaolong first entered Xianyang. We know this because in this chapter, 'Wang Ci'

few others.

The most amazing thing was that Lu Dan'er managed to sneak out as well to join the celebration. Naturally, she and Jing Jun became the butt of their good-natured jokes and added to the festivities.

Just as the festivities were reaching its peak, Wu Yingyuan joyfully shouted: "Recently, I won a large sum of money, and have been vexed as to how I should spend it all. Friends, do you have any suggestions?"

Wang He laughed: "This is the vexation of all gamblers. When they have money, all they can think about is how to spend it. But when they lose and owe others money, they have to painfully scrape it together from various sources. But of course! Mr. Wu's wealth matches that of an entire nation. Naturally, he only suffers from the first vexation!"

Everyone roared with laughter, aside from Huan Yi, whose lips pursed.

Seeing the situation, Xiang Shaolong suddenly came up with an idea: "Why don't we spend this money by helping little Yi outfit his rapid-response army!"

Everyone unanimously acclaimed the idea, but also felt it was a bit inappropriate.

Lord Changping asked: "Little Yi, you haven't yet told us what

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discusses being the 'secondary commander' to Bai Qi in the battle of Changping, which we know for a historical fact belonged to Wang He. Most likely, the archaic character 'He' was transliterated to 'Ci/Chi'. All future references to 'Wang Ci/Chi' should be changed to 'Wang He'; his identity is now without any doubt.

happened when you met with Lu Buwei."

Huan Yi let out several sighs before speaking: "When it comes to playing tricks, how can I be a match for that slippery old bandit? Although I agreed to propose to the court tomorrow morning that Meng Tian and Meng Wu be made my assistant commanders, he still uses the construction of the canal as an excuse for only gradually increasing my rapid-response army's funding. This clearly is for the sake of pressuring and controlling me."

Everyone felt a massive headache oncoming upon hearing these words. Lu Buwei was tightly grasping the purse strings of the kingdom, and using it to control the armies in a roundabout way. Any army setting out on an expedition or which required additional funding had to go through his permission and meet his demands.

Of the people present, Li Si was the most familiar with their national financial situation. He reminded: "Mr. Wu, why don't you offer this sum of money to the Crown Prince? The Crown Prince can place the money in his royal treasure and use it whenever an outlay of funds is needed, rather than needing to go through Lu Buwei and dealing with his blandishments."

Filled with a heroic aura, Wu Yingyuan said: "That's easy enough. I can add an additional sum of money on top of it as well and make the royal treasury very impressive indeed. As long as it causes difficulty for Lu Buwei, there is nothing that I, Wu Yingyuan, am not willing to do."

Everyone shouted in support.

As they were still discussing the details of the matter and were filled with optimism, Wang He let out a sigh: "All my life, I, Wang He, have only admired three people. Generals Bai Qi, Li Mu, and Lian Po. Bai Qi was ruthless and cunning, and Lian Po is unshakeable and profound. But when it comes to a divine-like ability to direct armies and unspeakably brilliant military tactics, Li Mu is the best. Even though the country of Zhao has lost Lian Po, so long as it has Li Mu, Great Qin will find it difficult to easily subjugate Zhao.

Curious, Wang Ling asked: "Everyone is filled with joy and happiness tonight. Ole' He, why must you suddenly be so gloomy?"

Under everyone's curious gaze, Wang He forced out a laugh: "Because I just received a message from the country of Wei. King Anli has fallen ill. This led me to remember that Lian Po's days are numbered as well, which saddens me."

Jing Jun didn't understand: "I've heard that King Anli was never willing to put Lian Po's services to good use. His passing should only bring benefit to Lian Po. Why do you say that Lian Po's days are numbered as well?"

Also surprised, Tao Fang remarked: "Lian Po is currently residing at Lord Xinling's residence. Clearly, he has a very close relationship with Prince Wuji. If King Anli passes away, Lord Xinling will become the most powerful man in Wei. When the river rises, the boat rises with it. Lian Po's situation will only improve, not worsen. Great General, why

do you suggest otherwise?"

Wang He saw that all of the onlookers seemed befuddled. Only Ji Yanran alone seemed to understand his thoughts. A gloomy look shooting forth from his eyes, he mournfully said: "As the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together. Although I have always faced Lian Po across the field of slaughter as enemies, seeing him fall to such a state causes me great pain. As to why I have this view of things, I am sure Learned Lady Ji already knows. I'd like to ask the Learned Lady to explain to everyone!"

Everyone present knew that Ji Yanran had lived in Daliang for a long period of time, and was clearly informed as to the going-on's of that place. Everyone's eyes turned towards her.

A lost, chilly look had already appeared in the eyes of this learned, world-famous beauty. Her fragrant lips gently sighed: "If King Anli is about to die, Prince Xinling will not long survive him. After Lian Po loses his source of support, the only option he will have is to flee Wei and depart. Although the people of Chu have Li Yuan, they are too satisfied to simply hold their current territories. It is likely that Lian Po will never accomplish anything ever again.

Only now did everyone understand.

Based on King Anli's temperament, in the days before his death, he would come up with vicious ways to murder Lord Xinling or force him to his death somehow. Otherwise, the Crown Prince of Wei would find his position difficult to



maintain. When it comes to a struggle over royal power, there would be no mercy or humanity.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of Lord Longyang. He would naturally be a member of the Crown Prince's clique. With King Anli's illness, Lord Longyang would naturally now be in the middle of a fierce, ferocious life-and-death battle. This was a battle of either total victory or total defeat. There wouldn't be the slightest bit of gray.

Huan Yi respectfully asked Wang He for more advice: "Elder General Wang, earlier, you said that Bai Qi was a hair inferior to Li Mu. Might I ask why you say this? All know that he has never lost a battle. Over thirty seven years of war, he had conquered over seventy cities and displayed his power. He understood his enemies and was extremely adaptable, filled with endless stratagems and never once tasting defeat. At the battle of Changping, he feigned a retreat to lure the opponent in, then encircled and cut them off. This strategy resulted in victory in a single swoop, causing Zhao to be dramatically weakened. Who can compare with his accomplishments in that single short battle?"

Huan Yi clearly held a tremendous amount of esteem for that elder, now-deceased general, Bai Qi. He couldn't resist from speaking in Bai Qi's defense.

A nostalgic look appeared in Wang He's eyes. He slowly said: "Bai Qi was the principal commander at the battle of Changping. I was the subordinate commander. At this time, that was a highly classified secret. The late king had actually

issued an order: 'Anyone who reveals the presence of Bai Qi, the Lord of Martial Peace, is to be executed.' The people of Zhao did not know that the commander of our army was actually the Lord of Martial Peace. This was a tactic which Bai Qi often employed. In order to use it successfully, he would refrain from nothing."

Xiang Shaolong felt a very peculiar sensation in his heart.

For a man of the twenty first century to return to the ancient Warring States period and listen to a famous general like Wang He slowly narrate that most critical, most pivotal of battles, was a difficult-to-describe feeling.

The battle of Changping could be said to be the most commonly-discussed battle by people of this era. Aside from the people of Zhao, who were unwilling to discuss that heart-breaking event, everyone else talked about it nonstop. But as they listened to Wang He, who had actually participated in the battle as an important general on the Qin side, everyone present felt a sense of awe towards him, and felt all the more interested and thrilled to listen.

Wang He sighed: "Lian Po really did grow even more unyielding with age. He knew that I was in a strong position and he was in a weak one. He diverted all of his efforts into defending, with the goal of exhausting my armies. It appeared to be a conservative decision, but actually it was an entirely wise one. You must understand, Changping is surrounded by natural barriers. It really is an un-paralleled defensive hub. Before the battle of Changping, Bai Qi and I

came to a strategic agreement. First, we would attack the country of Han. Bai Qi would take the lead in occupying the border between Han and Wei, a strategic point, while I would attack from the north and charge towards Changping. But the opposing general, Lian Po, had already foreseen our actions and made preparations. He had already ordered that defensive structures be emplaced and stockpiled large amounts of food. He was prepared to engage with us in a long, grinding battle.

Wang Ling nodded: "Lian Po really is full of schemes. Not only did he cause our grand army to be faced a fortified region against which an army would be useless, he also constantly sent people out to harass and attack our supply lines, causing our armies to run short on rations and supplies. At the time, I was in charge of providing our reinforcements with their supplies. In the meantime, Lian Po was waiting at his ease for us to collapse of exhaustion. He had built that sturdy defense line as well as a solid line of communication between him and their capital, Handan. This put us in an extremely unfavorable position. The Zhao king, Xiaocheng, was young and brash and thought that Lian Po had grown timid in his old age. He fell prey to rumors of dissension which we sowed. He underestimated us and arrogantly replaced Lian Po with Zhao Kuo. If he hadn't done those things, it most likely would have been we who would have been defeated. Thus, the Battle of Changping was determined by King Xiaocheng's erroneous decision in replacing generals. The military strategies of the Lord of

Martial Peace played only a secondary role."

Wang He continued to explain: "This old warrior is still filled with the utmost admiration for Great General Bai. But a formidable ruler will have formidable ministers. The late king relied heavily on Bai Qi from the very beginning. Starting from the rank of senior minister, after two years, he ascended to the rank of supreme commander of our forces. And the Lord of Martial Peace never let the late king down. In his second year of commanding the army, he used his world-shaking armored mounted chargers at the battle of Yique to shatter the combined Han-Wei army of over two hundred and forty thousand troops with barely a third of their number and capture their general, Gongsun Xi. The country of Wei lost all five of its western provinces. The next year, he successively attacked Wei's former capital, Anyi, as well as sixty one nearby cities. This is why Wei, formerly the most powerful of all the states, has now been reduced to tottering on its last legs."

A look of deep respect appeared in Lord Changping's eyes. Sighing, he said: "Such amazing exploits are rarely seen indeed. Why is it that you still believe him to be inferior to Li Mu?"

Wang He shook his head, smiling bitterly: "The reason that the Lord of Martial Peace was able to enjoy such unprecedented success was because his tactics and stratagems were also unprecedented in their ruthlessness. After every victorious battle, he would slaughter every single captured enemy soldier so as to weaken his opponent's

strength. Although this is the most formidable of tactics, it isn't a tactic which others are incapable of carrying out. In addition, it goes against the laws of heaven. It's far inferior to Li Mu's calm magnanimity. Compared to Li Mu, he is still slightly inferior.

Only now did everyone understand why it was that in Wang He's heart, Bai Qi still could not match Li Mu.

Li Mu was able to cause his enemy's leading general to be filled with admiration towards him. From this alone, one could tell how formidable he must be.

Li Si sighed: "The Battle of Changping really was the critical pivot point where Great Qin swung from a position of weakness to a position of strength. Who would have thought that the son of Zhao She, who had inflicted such a dramatic defeat on our armies in years past, would prove to be so useless. The battle which Zhao She won was the only defeat which the Lord of Martial Peace ever suffered."

Blushing, Huan Yi said: "I never considered that battle to be Bai Qi's defeat."

Wang He said with great sincerity towards Xiang Shaolong: "The reason this old warrior suggested to the Crown Prince that you be promoted to the rank of Great General was for you to serve as a counter to Li Mu. When I look about me at the generals of Qin, only you and Wang Jian could give Li Mu a good tussle. Although Wang Ling and I both have a high reputation, we lack the ability you have of making soldiers willing to give their lives for you."

Deep inside, Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly. He might be able to deal with others, but with Li Mu? Even if he could harden his heart to do so, the chances for success were slim. But hatefully, this was something which would happen sooner or later.

Lord Changping nodded: "The Great General's words are like an arrow that flies straight to the mark. Recently, Li Mu has annihilated over a hundred thousand Xiongnu horsemen, then forced several barbarian tribes in Donghu and Linhu to surrender. He has forced Chanyu<sup>13</sup> Wang of the Xiongnu into a very difficult position. In the short term, he won't be able to infringe upon Zhao territories. In a time of chaos and danger such as we are in now, no matter how suspicious and jealous Empress Jing and Guo Kai might be of Li Mu, they'll be forced to recall him and have him defend the eastern borders."

Li Si calmly said: "Aside from General Li Mu, the country of Zhao have two other major generals as well; Pang Yuan and Sima Shang. For the moment, Guo Kai is still suppressing Li Mu with all his might. But once Pang Yuan and Sima Shang taste the sting of defeat, the time for Li Mu's return will draw near."

Xiang Shaolong's admiration for Li Mu increased even more. Even such a ferocious general such as Wang He seemed to turn pale when even mentioning Li Mu's name. From this, one could tell that he really was an extraordinary hero.

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<sup>13</sup> The traditional title for the Xiongnu leader

Everyone discussed this for a while longer before they all departed.

When he woke up the next morning, Xiang Shaolong first painstakingly practiced his sabre style for a while before leaving the manor with Ji Yanran. The latter was heading out for the sake of preparing for the Black Dragon's appearance during the Spring Sacrifices. If anything went wrong, they would become the greatest laughingstocks of the world.

Li Si had already informed Xiao Pan in advance regarding Wu Yingyuan's donation to the imperial coffers and Huan Yi needing financial support for the outfitting of his rapid-response army. Thus, he didn't need to see Xiao Pan immediately, and proceeded directly to the morning court, saving much time.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt incomparably relaxed. Ever since King Zhuan's murder, good things and bad things had come crashing forward in waves, starting with the imperial hunt, then the trip to the country of Chu, followed by the battle just two nights ago. He had been so busy that he hadn't even had the chance to take a breath. But at this moment, the pressure was greatly relieved.

For the near future at least, there shouldn't be anything particularly troublesome.

He could be considered somewhat pitiable. Aside from those few short days of bliss when he first arrived and lived with Mei Canniang, he hadn't been able to whole-heartedly enjoy this marvelous life in the past which had been given to him.

Just as his thoughts began to wander, the sound of hoofsteps behind him could be heard.

Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians simultaneously turned their heads. It was Lao Ai. Behind him was Han Jie, and behind them was a large group of their followers, clearing a path for them.

In terms of style and air, Xiang Shaolong did appear a bit inferior.

Lao Ai turned in towards Xiang Shaolong. Laughing, he said: "Official Xiang, why did you leave out your younger brother and not invite me to last night's banquet?"

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely awkward. As he busily greeted Han Jie and the others, he suddenly managed to come up with an answer. Smiling, he said: "How could that be considered a banquet? It was just that Lord Changping spontaneously decided to throw me a congratulatory party, and forced the Wang generals to come as well. But the food and wine they drank all belonged to me, and they took full advantage of it! Official Lao, please don't blame me; if you must blame someone, blame that dratted Left Premier!"

Hearing his amusing words, Lao Ai, Han Jie, and everyone else present roared with laughter. The atmosphere became, at least superficially, much more friendly.

Lao Ai laughed so hard that he began to pant for breath: "Official Xiang's eloquence can perhaps match that of Su Qi and Zhang Yi. You make it impossible for your younger brother to blame anyone. By the by, I also wish to apologize



to you. The other night, Qiu Risheng decided of his own accord to act so audaciously. Your younger brother has already severely scolded him. I hope that Official Xiang won't take it to heart."

Xiang Shaolong secretly cheered. He knew that Lao Ai had decided to focus on Lu Buwei as his principle enemy, which is why he had so humbly and courteously come to mend fences with him. Laughing, he said: "Sometimes, subordinates just aren't very obedient. Oh! Why hasn't Guo Xing come to report to me yet?"

Behind them, Han Jie laughed: "I'm the one who is the most familiar with this matter. Before ten days or half a month or so has passed, none of his seals, stamps, or regalia will be ready. How could he dare to visit you before then?"

By this point in time, the palace gates could be seen. Catching Xiang Shaolong by surprise, Lao Ai said: "In short, the Drunken Wind Pavilion has recently been graced with the presence of a song-and-dance troop of world-class beauties. Official Xiang, tonight, you simply must come to the Drunken Wind Pavilion with me and get drunk with me. If you refuse, it means that you do not consider me, Lao Ai, as your friend."

Xiang Shaolong secretly said: "Bastard, I've never considered you to be my friend." But naturally, he couldn't reveal those thoughts. Forcing out a smile, he said: "If my wife, Ji Yanran, scolds me for not coming home and staying out late at night, then I'm afraid that you, the Inner Custodian, will have to

bear the brunt of her displeasure."

Lao Ai couldn't help but laugh: "I never knew that Official Xiang was so witty! Alas! I wish night would come sooner, so that I might enjoy a few cups of wine with you. Tonight at dusk, your younger brother will respectfully await your honored presence at the Drunken Wind Pavilion."

Xiang Shaolong secretly grumbled to himself. His hope was the exact opposite of Lao Ai's. He hoped that it would forever be day, so that he wouldn't have to spend an entire night putting on a false, hypocritical display of friendship with Lao Ai.

## CHAPTER 3

## Yet Another Venomous Scheme

[Translated by REN WO XING]

IN the tug-of-war between officials and the crown, Huan Yi's rapid-response army really was a crucial chess piece. If Xiao Pan was able to take it under his control, then anyone thinking about rebelling would have to worry about Huan Yi's crack troops.

The people in the rapid-response army were all selected from outside the capital. They were kept apart from everyone else and formed an entirely separate body of their own. Unlike the Imperial Infantry, the Imperial Cavalry, or

the city guards, they wouldn't be so easily bribed or bought. This was why Lu Buwei was extremely cautious towards them, using both soft and hard techniques to place his own people within the rapid-response army.

Fortunately, the two people he selected were Meng Wu and Meng Tian. His selection of these two candidates was also an attempt to please their father, Meng Ao.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong would naturally be 'disadvantaged' by this.

When Huan Yi made the request for two assistant commander slots to be opened under him, Lu Buwei and his men immediately and strongly recommended the Meng brothers for the positions. Xiao Pan put on an act of being hesitant and unwilling, before finally, 'reluctantly' agreeing.

Lao Ai was caught flatfooted. In those few moments, he was unable to immediately come up with candidates amongst his own people who had more military accomplishments and who came from more influential backgrounds than those two. He could only sigh in disappointment.

The marvelous thing was, this increased his animosity and wariness towards Lu Buwei all the more.

Naturally, Xiang Shaolong was laughing inside. Right now, his only desire was to spend the rest of his life in peaceful happiness after the Black Dragon made its appearance. By the time Xiao Pan ascended to the throne, Lu Buwei's position would have been drastically weakened. With a

single blow, they would lay both Lu Buwei and Lao Ai flat, and then he would naturally retire from office. Aside from his distaste towards war, he couldn't bear to watch the six nations be flattened by the Qin juggernaut. And there was a third, hidden reason which even he himself wasn't willing to clearly think about. It was Xiao Pan's imminent 'deterioration'.

The historical Qin Shihuang became brutal, tyrannical, and utterly despotic in all of his dealings. If he were to remain by Xiao Pan's side, how could he bear to watch Xiao Pan devolve into such a person?

Thus, the only option he had was to avoid watching and depart.

He was affecting history, but history was also affecting him. As to the questions of cause and effect, of the chicken and the egg? Most likely, even Heaven wouldn't be able to discern the answers clearly.

After the morning court ended, Lu Buwei was openly jubilant while Xiao Pan and the others were secretly so.

Xiang Shaolong was summoned by Xiao Pan to his study room. Together with Li Si and Lord Changping, they analyzed the plans behind the Black Dragon's appearance in great detail before departing the palace.

As he passed by the Qin residence, he couldn't resist from sneaking in and seeking her yet again. He didn't expect to find her ordering people to pack her belongings. When she saw him, she pulled him off to one side. A single tear

trembling in her eyes, she said: "I was just about to send someone to find you. Lady Huayang has fallen ill. I'm going to go see her immediately. Alas!"

Xiang Shaolong seemed to be totally stunned: "You are leaving in such a hurry..."

Qin Qing leaned against his chest: "The benevolence which the Lady has shown towards me is weightier than a mountain. Over the past few years, her health has grown poorer and poorer. It's amazing that she's made it as long as she has. That is why Qin Qing must be by her side, no matter what, during these last few days that she will have. After this affair is finished, I will return to your side. Please don't say anything which would make me feel even worse, alright?"

Xiang Shaolong calmed himself: "Does the Crown Prince know?"

Qin Qing said: "I just ordered someone to go inform him and the Empress Dowager."

What else could Xiang Shaolong say? He personally escorted her out of the city. They traveled for over ten li before reluctantly parting. By the time he returned to Xianyang, it was nightfall and gaudy lanterns had already been raised. He remembered his appointment with Lao Ai, and let out a helpless sigh. And then, he went to keep his appointment.

As he entered the Drunken Wind Pavilion, Wu Fu came to greet him, personally escorting him to the private courtyard which Lao Ai had reserved. Bowing, he said: "The Lord Inner Custodian came long ago."

Xiang Shaolong casually asked: "Who else is here?"

Wu Fu said: "The majority of the people present are the Lord Inner Custodian's guests. The only exception is Mister Pu."

Astonished, Xiang Shaolong came to a halt. Losing his voice, he cried out: "Pu Hu actually came?"

At the moment, the two were standing on a small pathway outside of the courtyard with a grove. Many customers and serving girls were crossing by. Wu Fu pulled Xiang Shaolong aside, into the grove, checking to see if anyone was near, aside from the Eighteen Guardians. Only then did he say in a low voice: "Great General, would you be willing to hear a few sincere, heartfelt words from I, Wu Fu?"

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. Any who believed the 'sincere, heartfelt words' from a person like Wu Fu would surely be either an idiot or a retard.

But of course, on the surface, he acted very interested: "Owner Wu, please feel free to speak openly." At the same time, he made a few hand motions to Jing Shan and the others, ordering them to keep an eye on their surroundings."

Wu Fu suddenly fell to his knees. Kowtowing, he said: "Wu Fu wishes to follow you, lord. In the future, I will be loyal to you, and you alone."

Xiang Shaolong didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. When it comes down to it, Wu Fu is a person of means and stature, as the owner of the largest brothel in Xianyang.

For such a person to abase himself before Xiang Shaolong

and 'surrender' to him...how to deal with such a man?

He hurriedly pulled Wu Fu up and said: "Owner Wu, you mustn't act in such a way!"

Who would've expected that Wu Fu obstinately continued to cling to the ground? This fellow's acting ability really was something. In a tear-filled voice, he said: "Wu Fu foolishly assisted in the plan to harm Great General Xiang. Now, I am filled with regrets, but it is too late. I only hope that in the future, I be allowed to whole-heartedly devote myself to you and do something on your behalf. If you, great sir, are not willing to agree to this, then why don't you simply go and...alas!...go and kill me with a single chop of the sabre."

How could Xiang Shaolong be unaware of Wu Fu's intentions?

A lowly, base man like Wu Fu was like a man who had grass growing from his forehead. Whichever way the wind blew, he would follow.

In the past, he thought that Lu Buwei had the upper hand, and so he conspired to harm Xiang Shaolong. But now, he was slowly beginning to discover that Xiang Shaolong wasn't a man to be easily crossed. And over the past few days, he was also beginning to discover that Xiang Shaolong and the Crown Prince were as close to one another as one's lips were to one's teeth, and that Xiang Shaolong had the support of Great Generals such as Wang He and Wang Ling. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong had triumphed over Guan Zhongxie and was himself promoted to the rank of Great General. If this



continued, after Lu Buwei was defeated, he, Wu Fu, would be driven away from Xianyang, and in the worst case scenario, even his kinsmen might be affected. Considering the circumstances, the only solution was for him to profess undying loyalty towards Xiang Shaolong.

From this, he could also tell that Wu Fu had decided to place his bets on Xiao Pan in the competition for military control.

Thus, although Wu Fu was a person whose eyes were solely fixed upon the marketplace, he had far better vision and foresight than many others.

Xiang Shaolong was silent for some time, before saying in a stern voice: "If you wish for me, Xiang Shaolong, to consider you one of my people, then you must prove your loyalty to me through deeds. In addition, in the future, you must serve me with whole-hearted loyalty. Otherwise, I definitely will not spare you."

Kowtowing, Wu Fu said: "Great General, please trust me. In the end, I, Wu Fu, am an ethnic Qin. In the past, I was just foolish and muddle-headed. I thought that the Premier Mentor had the trust and affection of the Crown Prince, while you, Great General, were...were..."

Xiang Shaolong didn't know how many people in the past Wu Fu had pledged his loyalty to. How could he now so easily trust him? Filled with disgust, he shouted: "Stand up before talking!"

Wu Fu continued to kowtow: "Tonight, even if this humble one has to risk life and limb, I still need to tell the Great

General about Lao Ai's vile plot."

Xiang Shaolong knew from the very beginning that Wu Fu must have a card which he was preparing to play. That was why Wu Fu was willing to come to him and pledge loyalty. But he hadn't expected it to be related to Lao Ai. Half-believing, half-doubting, he said: "If Lao Ai is planning something, how would you possibly find out?"

Wu Fu said: "Please allow me to explain this matter fully."

Xiang Shaolong growled softly: "If you still refuse to get up, I will immediately turn and walk away."

Wu Fu was so terrified that he leapt to his feet.

Xiang Shaolong pulled him deeper within the courtyard, to sit beneath a small bridge: "Speak. But say not a single word which is false. Otherwise, you won't live to see the next sunrise."

Ashamed, Wu Fu said: "This humble one wouldn't dare to deceive you, great sir, Great General."

After pausing for a moment, Wu Fu focused on the subject at hand: "The Inner Custodian has recently received a guest from Qi called Mao Jiao. This person has reached the acme of fame in his chosen field of medicine."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked. Wasn't Mao Jiao the spy which Xiao Pan had sent into Lao Ai's services? How did he get caught up in this affair? Could he actually be a double agent?

Wu Fu saw that he was silent and uncommunicative. How

could he guess the reason behind it? He thought that Xiang Shaolong didn't believe him, and so spoke more forcefully: "This person was once the Imperial Physician to the King of Qi. He is a man of real talent and genuine learning."

Frowning mightily, Xiang Shaolong said: "Lao Ai is going to use him to poison me? That is probably more difficult than using actual assassins."

In a hushed voice, Wu Fu said: "The person Lao Ai is going to poison is the Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong involuntarily cried out: "What?!"

Wu Fu solemnly and cautiously explained: "Ever since that day I met the Crown Prince, I have been unable to forget that lofty, hegemonic air he carries about him, capable of overcome the entire world. When the Crown Prince's gaze swept across me, I felt incapable of hiding anything from him. The most impressive, hardest to accomplish feat was that when he was faced with beautiful women, he maintained his presence, unlike the likes of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, who immediately lose their bearings. Thus, last night, when Meimei came back from accompanying Lao Ai and jauntily told me that Lao Ai would soon be able to overthrow Lu Buwei, I immediately grew anxious, although she told me no more."

Xiang Shaolong felt as though he was slowly beginning to be convinced by this person whom he had always held in contempt.

The main point of doubt was that at the moment, Lao Ai

didn't have a strong enough base of supporters and assistants. If he were to assassinate Xiao Pan at this point in time, there would be little direct benefit for himself and Zhu Ji. It would also be of no benefit to Lu Buwei. Both Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji's source of authority ultimately sprang from Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong calmly said: "If Lao Ai were to dare engage in an act of treason which would result in his entire clan being exterminated, how could he easily let others know?"

Wu Fu said: "The relationship between Meimei and Lao Ai is not a superficial one. They have been intimate for many years, but in the past, because of Lu Buwei, they could only meet furtively. Now, although he has become the Inner Custodian, he still isn't able to overcome Lu Buwei. And now, with Lu Buwei intending to take her as his concubine, how could Lao Ai not grow desperate? It's very natural for him to expose some secrets to her."

Xiang Shaolong had learned long ago of the intimate relationship between Dan Meimei and Lao Ai. Deep inside, his belief increased by a few more points. Frowning, he said: "What benefit would assassinating the Crown Prince bring Lao Ai?"

Wu Fu solemnly said: "In order to assassinate the Crown Prince, there's no need at all for him to use an expert doctor like Mao Jiao. Many of the Crown Prince's aides are Lao Ai's men. What's more, if anything happened to the Crown Prince, everyone would place the blame squarely on Lu

Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "The situation is indeed as you describe."

Wu Fu saw that Xiang Shaolong was beginning to believe him. He began to grow excited, but lowered his voice as much as possible: "After Meimei spoke those words which aroused my suspicions, she retired to her room. I knew that she was not the type of person who could keep a secret, and that she would go speak to her closest, most trusted friends about it. And so I eavesdropped for an entire night, before I finally learned just a little bit more."

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's eyes grow wide, Wu Fu awkwardly explained: "Xiang Shaolong, please don't misunderstand. It's an old trick to install copper hearing tubes and other eavesdropping devices in the rooms of the courtesans. She doesn't know about it at all. It's fortunate that this was the case, as I otherwise wouldn't have been able to uncover Lao Ai's plot."

Listening to this story, Xiang Shaolong's gaze grew dazed and his mouth became slack. If Wu Fu hadn't personally explained this to him, he would never have realized that when the Four Beauties of the Drunken Wind Pavilion were engaged in 'flipping flowers and overturning islands', someone might be listening with one ear respectfully pressed against the hearing mechanisms."

Wu Fu continued: "Meimei told her confidante, Xiu Ju, that Lao Ai was going to have Mao Jiao prepare a special

medicine which, if taken several times, would cause a person to become stupid and dull, and do nothing but want to sleep all day. As long as the Crown Prince is administered this medicine a few times, it will be very difficult for him to handle the affairs of state during the morning court. By then, the Empress will control all the power of the court. If Lao Ai wants there to be wind, there will be wind; if he wants there to be rain, there will be rain."

Xiang Shaolong was instantly covered in cold sweat.

This scheme really was extraordinarily vicious. The most ingenious part of it was that anyone suspicious about the matter would turn his attention towards Lu Buwei. After all, Lu Buwei had done something similar in the past.

Just as his heart began to tremble, Wu Fu continued: "Actually, Meimei feels something for you as well, great sir. It's only because you paid her no mind at all that her love for you has turned to hate. I've raised her since she was young; ever since she was a child, she's been arrogant and proud. She pays no mind at all to most people. Many people have offered to buy her and give her freedom, but she's refused. But now, it looks as though she has wholeheartedly decided to follow Lao Ai."

At this point in time, how could Xiang Shaolong possibly be bothered to worry about whether or not Dan Meimei is interested in him? Lowering his head, he asked: "Is Yang Yu intertwined with Xu Shang? Isn't she Guan Zhongxie's woman?"

Wu Fu sneered: "Guan Zhongxie has always considered women to be nothing more than sexual playthings. How could he be bothered to care about Yang Yu? Little Yu has always been a very sentimental person. I think she's more interested in you than in Xu Shang! If you are interested, sir, I can give her to you. Aside from Gui Yan, all four of the women listen to me."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but laugh: "Don't say these things to intentionally flatter me. Why is it that Gui Yan doesn't listen to you?"

Wu Fu forced out a laugh: "This girl has always been stubborn. Ever since Mo Ao's death, her temperament has totally changed, and she thinks of nothing besides avenging him. She won't even listen to my entreaties. I only hope that you, great sir, won't be bothered to deal with her."

Xiang Shaolong didn't expect that Wu Fu had a benevolent side to him as well. Smiling, he said: "Relax! If I wanted to deal with her, I would've done so long ago."

Realizing that he shouldn't stay here too long, he grew solemn: "I will report this matter to the Crown Prince. When the day of Lao Ai's demise comes, we naturally will not forget this meritorious service which you rendered."

Overflowing with thanks, Wu Fu fell down and prostrated on the floor once more.

Xiang Shaolong pulled him up. Only then did he leave the courtyard to meet his appointment with Lao Ai.

He couldn't help but feel many emotions at once.

For Lao Ai to act in such a way, he most certainly must have Zhu Ji's concurrence.

It's said that even vicious tigers won't consume their own offspring. Who would've that for her lover's sake, Zhu Ji would be willing to harden her heart and harm her "own son"?

From this moment forward, he wouldn't feel any more guilt towards Zhu Ji at all.

When they reached the private courtyard, Xiang Shaolong ordered Jing Shan and the others to remain outside, while he and Wu Fu strode into the main pavilion.

Six placemats were arranged in two lines within the pavilion. When Lao Ai saw Xiang Shaolong walk in, that treacherous thug revealed a look of joy on his face. He led Pu Hu, Han Jie, Ling Qi, Lao Si, and the others in rising to their feet. All of the accompanying girls instantly prostrated on the floors as well. It was a very grand and solemn welcome.

Xiang Shaolong paused for a moment, sweeping the room with a vigorous gaze. All four of the Four Flowers had arrived. Bai Lei was accompanying Pu Hu, Dan Meimei and Yang Yu were both by Lao Ai's side, while Gui Yan was seated next to Lao Si. Han Jie and Ling Qi both had different girls accompanying them. Although they couldn't compare to Bai Lei, they were definitely above-average.

Seeing that they hadn't yet started the banquet, Xiang



Shaolong knew that everyone had been waiting for him. Apologetically, he said: "Please forgive me for the sin of being tardy. But please do not punish me with wine either; otherwise, although I'm the last to arrive, I'll be the first to leave."

Hearing his clever, pearl-like words, everyone roared in laughter. Delicate female laughter intermingled with the coarse, heroic laughter of the men, carrying with it an indescribable, intoxicating allure.

Wu Fu led Xiang Shaolong to his seat, next to Lao Ai's. Lao Ai happily laughed: "For Great General Xiang, well-known to rarely appear in houses of lust, to be willing to grace us with his presence gives us ravenous, lustful wolves a great deal of face. How can we quibble about whether or not the Great General arrives late or leaves early?"

Xiang Shaolong sat down. His seat was directly opposite that of the great traitor, Pu Hu. The latter raised his glass: "This toast isn't a punishment, but a congratulatory toast. That night, I lost so much money that I even forgot my old man's name. I forgot to congratulate the Great General for his victory as well! Allow me to offer you this toast in recompense."

Everyone raised their cups in salute.

Xiang Shaolong hesitated for a moment as he suddenly thought of Mao Jiao. If he were to tell himself that he wasn't concerned, he would be lying to himself.

Wu Fu pretended to bow down, while seizing the chance to

whisper: "The wine is fine. All of it is newly opened." Only then did he bow out.

Perhaps it was all in his head, but Xiang Shaolong could feel that the gazes of Meimei and Yang Yu were different from before as they watched him. It seemed as though the gazes weren't just filled with hate, and had love as well.

Putting his cup down, Lao Ai first introduced the two remaining girls. The girl by Han Jie's side was Dan Fu; the girl by Ling Qi's side was Hua Ling. He laughed: "Please don't blame me for trying to monopolize the ladies. Of the two ladies by my side, one of them came here with the express purpose of accompanying you. I'm just taking care of her on your behalf while you weren't here. Now, I'll return her to her proper host. Sir, please take your pick!"

Xiang Shaolong naturally wouldn't treat women as commodities to be traded, but this was simply how people of the age viewed things. Flowers with owners were private property; flowers without owners were commodities to be traded. Thus, Dan Meimei and Yang Yu were both happy to obey, without any intention of disobedience. They even revealed traces of a smile as they gazed at Xiang Shaolong, looking slightly competitive as they awaited Xiang Shaolong's selection.

Xiang Shaolong wasn't sure what to do. It would've been best if he hadn't listened to Wu Fu's words. After he had, he wasn't sure how he should treat the two girls.

But he knew quite well that although it wasn't necessary to

"avoid them like a serpent's tongue", he should still "maintain a solemn, respectful distance". Laughing, he said: "How would ole Xiang dare to seize Official Lao's fortune? For you to have all the beauties to yourself is a very wonderful thing. It would be better if I called for another girl instead."

The two girls immediately put on an appearance of disagreement, even acting like spoiled children with Lao Ai, filling the entire pavilion with just the right aura of spring love. At the same time, they gave face to both Lao Ai and Xiang Shaolong. They really lived up to their reputations as the two top girls of the place of pleasure.

Pu Hu laughed loudly: "Master Xiang really is formidable! With this masterstroke, he's managed to avoiding both of our girls and causing them to be disappointed. If I, Pu Hu, had known long ago about how talented you were, I wouldn't have made the wrong judgment at your duel, exhausting myself while losing all of my money. I have to rely on Master Ao's financial assistance, now, to be able to afford a bit of intimacy with my dear Little Lei."

After speaking, he gave Bai Lei, whom he held in his arms, a kiss on the lips.

Bai Lei not only refused his advances, she even snaked her arms up his thighs and gave him a hard pinch, arousing everyone's amusement and causing great laughter.

Perhaps it was because he was now aware of Lao Ai's plot, but Xiang Shaolong simply couldn't connect with the

merriment and pleasure at the pavilion. When he thought of how he was back in the 21st century at those places of drunken debauchery, he realized how formidable he'd become.

To this point, he still wasn't sure what Lao Ai and Pu Hu's connection was. Logically speaking, Pu Hu should be Du Bi's man, who in turn supported Cheng Qiao, who had the backing of Madame Xiuli. He should be at loggerheads with Lao Ai, who belonged to the faction of the Empress Dowager. But now, he acted as if he were old friends with Lao Ai, causing others to feel strange.

And Pu Hu's eyes were filled with craftiness and wisdom; clearly, he was a man of ambition who was bold. But the appearance he put on in front of others was that of a lecherous, alcoholic businessman! From this, one can tell that this person wasn't simple at all.

Ling Qi, seated next to Pu Hu, laughed: "Boss Hu is always so humorous. Who doesn't know that your wealth has exceeded that of Qin or Zhao, and is only increasing day after day?"

Pu Hu sighed: "When it comes to doing business, how can I compare to the Great General's father-in-law? He's even taken into his possession the territories of Quezhong, Bashu, and Hedong. Even if we ignore his holdings in livestock, his trade in mulberries, flax, fish, plates, copper, iron, and other goods turns enough profit to astonish and frighten. How could a humble, small-time businessman compare?"

Lao Ai couldn't help but laugh: "Boss Pu, you aren't trying to arouse General Xiang's sympathy and have him urge Boss Wu to return his winnings to you, are you?"

At this, even Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but laugh. This man really did have a talent for charming others.

Ling Qi laughed: "Boss Pu's supreme headquarters is in Sanchuan, which has always been the province of Emperors. The others, such as Shangyang, are all too far away. Sanchuan is a fertile, rich province, with huge amounts of commercial traffic and a flourishing economy. Boss Pu, for you to complain in such a way, isn't this the same as the saying, 'Another man's woman is more desirable than your own'?"

These words once more provoked everyone into a round of loud laughter.

Xiang Shaolong secretly raised his guard against Lao Ai's strategic advisor by a few more notches. Just from these few words, one could tell that he was a man with vision and knowledge.

Mao Jiao, whom Xiao Pan had appointed to be a spy, hadn't yet appeared. Most likely, it was because he had arrived too soon and had not yet had a chance to penetrate this inner circle. Only after he harmed Xiao Pan would his situation improve.

At this moment, Gui Yan, who was accompanying Lao Si, let out a sharp cry. It turned out Lao Si hadn't been able to refrain from making a move against her, rubbing her arms

and legs.

The Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion were the most famous courtesans of Xianyang. People of slightly lower status would find it easier to enter heaven than to touch a single finger of theirs.

Even powerful officials like Lu Buwei and Lao Ai had to exhaust all of their skills in order to enter their fragrant rooms.

From this, one could tell that the price of their bodies was not an ordinary one. For Lao Si to be so hurriedly lecherous, one could tell that this gentleman was nothing more than a common, vulgar person. The only reason he was able to come here was because of his connection to Lao Ai.

The relationship between Lao Ai and Lao Si was similar to that of Lu Buwei and the deposed Lu Xiong. Appointing one's relatives to a high position was a common act in this day, but it also led to disaster and failure.

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of regret.

Previously, for a brief moment of joy, he pulled down Lu Xiong. This was an unwise decision. If he remained in the position of City Guard Commander, he could be used to tie down Guan Zhongxie.

When he recalled this, he made a decision to himself, that no matter what, before Lao Ai's fall, he must 'be kind' to Lao Si.

Lao Ai angrily glared at Lao Si before raising a cup in apology

to Gui Yan. Only then did this beautiful woman who hated Xiang Shaolong return to being demure and alluring, even though later, she would most certainly curse out Lao Si in front of her sisters.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of Wu Fu's 'precious treasure' which would enable to eavesdrop on the girls. He felt it was both preposterous and laughable.

In order to improve the atmosphere, Pu Hu sighed: "In terms of business acumen, the Premier Mentor is the real expert. The section on farming in his 'Lu Family Annals' is filled with broad wisdom and tremendous knowledge. It discusses how to fertilize the soil, how to utilize every corner of the field, how to spread out seeds, exterminate weeds, wipe out pests, apply manure, how to properly plow and aerate the soil, and the proper seasons for planting. From this, we can tell that his experience really is remarkable."

Han Jie sneered: "If I had as much money as him, I could put out a 'Han Family Annals' for fun. Right now, Qin is filled with so many people of talent. What can't we produce?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that Pu Hu had no good intentions, and was purposefully increasing the enmity between the Lu faction and the Lao faction. He couldn't help but secretly be covered in cold sweat.

When he came up with their plan to use the 'Five Eternal Elements' to counter the 'Lu Family Annals', he had stopped thinking about the Annals. Actually, the creation of the Annals was an epochal event which had deeply affected the

thinking of all intellectuals and philosophers of this era. It was an entire doctrine and ideology, which could best be described as the "Lu Family Doctrine".

Thus, even if Lao Ai's plot succeeded, the person who stood to benefit in the end most likely would still be Lu Buwei, and not Lao Ai.

Under the auspices of the court and the commoners, Lu Buwei could easily generate the momentum to push his power past that of Zhu Ji. By the time he formally took the position of Imperial Regent, based on his influence in both the civil sector and the military sector, great disaster would befall both Lao Ai and Xiang Shaolong.

Just as he was pondering all of this and as his mind was swimming across the vastness of the void, a warbling, oriole like voice could be heard: "Great General Xiang, your mind seems to be absent. There is wine, but it moistens not your lips; is your honored self lacking in rest?"

Xiang Shaolong was startled awake and saw that everyone's eyes were on him, while the person who had spoken was Yang Yu, whom Wu Fu has described as very sentimental. Using the opportunity to 'push the boat along with the current', he said: "Last night, I had a few too many cups of wine. Even after I woke up, my head still hurt and my legs were still wobbly...heh!"

Just as he wanted to use this as an excuse to slip away, Lao Ai interrupted: "If Master Mao hadn't been summoned to the palace by the Crown Prince to deal with his illness, we



could call him here to take a look at you. Master Mao is an illustrious, famous physician. I'm sure he has medicine to cure a hangover."

Xiang Shaolong was immediately covered in cold sweat.

For Xiao Pan to summon Master Mao into the court, he must be using illness as an excuse to receive a report. But Mao Jiao was a tool which Lao Ai was using in his plot. If, using flowery words or secretive actions, he was able to deceive Xiao Pan into drinking the poisoned medicine, it would be a calamity.

Although he realized that Xiao Pan was Qin Shihuang, and thus should not be turned into an idiot by others so easily, how could he be at ease, given how difficult it might be to predict certain things? When he thought of this, his heart was so anxious, it felt set aflame. He immediately rose to his feet and saluted everyone present: "Everyone, please forgive me. I just remembered an urgent task which I must immediately deal with."

Everyone stared at him in astonishment.

## CHAPTER 4

*An Open Challenge to Battle*

[Translated by REN WO XING]

FROWNING, Lao Ai said; "What is so urgent? Can you order your subordinates to handle it? The banquet hasn't even started yet! And in addition, there is the song-and-dance routine which I specially prepared for you."

Pu Hu also spoke: "Master Xiang, you haven't even warmed your seat yet. How can you leave in such a rush? None of us will let you leave."

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed at himself. This really could be handled by someone else. Wu Zhuo would be the best

person. So long as he sent word to Teng Yi, Teng Yi could then convey the message to Lord Changping. Smiling, he said: "You're right; I became foolish in my urgency. I'll go relay the instructions to my subordinates now. Everyone, please pardon me."

Only then did Lao Ai and the others relax and allow him to go.

Xiang Shaolong strode outside and arrived at the small pavilion where Jing Shan and the others were in the middle of a feast, while flirting with the pretty serving girls who were taking care of them. Wu Zhuo was nowhere to be seen.

At the same time, Wu Guang said in a terrified voice: "Wu Zhuo went to find his old lover. Master, please do not blame him."

How could Xiang Shaolong blame him? He wanted to send Jing Shan instead, but then decided that this would be a good chance to take a walk outside and relax. After finding out where Wu Zhuo had gone, he wanted to leave, but everyone hurriedly stood up behind him.

Xiang Shaolong had never liked a crowd following behind him wherever he went. When he saw them enjoying their feast, he told them to stop following him and slipped out on his own.

When he stepped into the copse of trees outside, he felt reinvigorated. When he remembered that he had a tender wife and loving child waiting at home, while he had to feign friendship with these people at this sort of place, he could

only let out a long sigh.

Quite soon, he arrived at the main road leading to the primary courtyard. It was late at night, while he was by himself, and so all of the courtesans and serving girls he encountered assumed that he was just a common man-at-arms and didn't pay much attention to him.

By the time he neared the primary courtyard, he suddenly saw Wu Fu rush towards him without a lantern. His head lowered, he didn't notice Xiang Shaolong at all as he scurried into a small path.

Xiang Shaolong grew suspicious and quickly, quietly followed him.

If he hadn't seen the man scurry towards the bamboo pavilion housing the Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion, he definitely wouldn't have followed.

This was because all four of the Flowers were at Lao Ai's banquet. Wu Fu should be busy taking care of the guests. There was no reason for him to head in this direction...unless someone was waiting for him.

Anyone waiting in the boudoir of any one of the Flowers must belong to Lao Ai's people or Lu Buwei's people. Otherwise, who would dare contend with them?

Since Lao Ai's people were all at the pavilion, who could it be besides Lu Buwei's subordinate?

Using the 21st century techniques of the special ops division, Xiang Shaolong closely followed behind Wu Fu and quickly

arrived at the bamboo residence.

He could see people milling around the entrance and escorting Wu Fu inside.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt inadequate to the task at hand. Previously, it was all thanks to Han Chuang's assistance that he managed to secretly enter this 'Secluded Bamboo Residence', which all men dreamed of entering. Right now, he didn't even have his climbing hooks. There was no possible way he could enter!

Just as he wanted to leave, a ray of light appeared in his head.

Didn't Wu Fu say that there were a series of copper tubes that allowed people to listen in on the Four Flowers, while they themselves wouldn't know about it?

This probably wasn't a lie, because all Xiang Shaolong had to do was to investigate in order to determine whether Wu Fu was telling the truth or not. This sort of listening device was probably similar to the hollow copper tube listening device installed at Lord Xinling's residence. It couldn't be installed in any of the four rooms, as it would otherwise have been discovered long ago.

But it should also be installed nearby, as the longer the distance became, the lower the transmission quality would be.

Xiang Shaolong no longer hesitated, as he went searching amidst the bamboo. Soon, he found a small storage building

within the bamboo grove. Behind it was a tall wall.

He quickly struck a match and began to search the building. Soon, he found a room that was particularly clean that had four large cabinets in it. They looked different compared to all of the other storage cabinets in the building, and were locked as well.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly took out his flying needles. In a short period of time, he unlocked one of the cabinets. Opening the cabinet, he couldn't help but cheer.

He saw a copper tube rise up from the floor, with the end appearing like a small loudspeaker, perfectly positioned for a person standing here to press his ears against.

At least Wu Fu, that brat, hadn't lied to him on the question of the eavesdropping installation.

But this copper tube clearly wasn't connected to the room Wu Fu had gone to, because he couldn't hear anything.

Xiang Shaolong tried opening the other cabinets. By the time he reached the third, he heard a faint sound, and he hurriedly pressed his ear against the tube.

From the sound of it, it was wine cups being clinked against one another.

After a long time, a man's voice could be heard, laughing.

After a person's voice travelled through these copper tubes, it would become distorted and unclear, so for the moment, he could not tell who it was that had just laughed.

Following that, another person said: "The Premier Mentor's plot really is formidable. Although Xiang Shaolong is crafty and suspicious, he wholly fell for my story."

How could Xiang Shaolong not realize that it was Wu Fu who was speaking? He was so furious that he gnashed his teeth.

The other voice laughed: "It's mostly because Boss Wu has naturally good acting skills. That's why this chain-of-pearls strategy the Premier Mentor came up with can succeed. When, in the future, the Crown Prince meets with disaster, no one will think that we had anything to do with it."

Just from the way the man spoke, it was obvious that the man was Guan Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed to himself: "What a narrow escape!"

If he hadn't decided to stealthily spy on the conversation and hear these words, he would have taken a tremendous tumble, one which he might never recover from.

From this, he could also tell that Xiao Pan really was the heaven-ordained Qin Shihuang, whose good fortune was determined by heaven.

Whereas Lu Buwei was only defeated because of luck. Or perhaps it was because this had all been planned out according to the will of heaven.

At the same time, he felt a sense of exhaustion.

Lu Buwei was filled with countless venomous schemes, one

after the other. When would he have time for peace?

Only when the Black Dragon appeared.

Lu Buwei's voice could be heard from the copper tube: "Is Meimei still accompanying those bandits?"

Wu Fu laughed: "Premier Mentor, please be at ease. Xiang Shaolong was terrified by my words and will find an excuse to leave early, so that he can inform the Crown Prince. Whereas I have already informed Lao Ai that tonight, Meimei can only accompany him until ten, after which she must leave. I'll escort her back here at that time."

Lu Buwei coldly sneered. Disdainfully, he said: "This fake eunuch actually dares to fight with me, Lu Buwei, over a woman. I think he's tired of living."

After listening for a while longer, Xiang Shaolong realized that he wouldn't be able to discover anything else. Relocking the cupboards, he quietly snuck out.

Returning to Lao Ai's pavilion, he saw that Qiu Risheng and the three principal instructors of the Weinan Martial School, Guo Xin, An Jinliang, and Chang Jie had all arrived as well. They sat on four freshly prepared seats. Four more beautiful courtesans had appeared as well, pouring wine for them. In beauty, they were slightly inferior to Dan Xia and Hua Ling, who were serving Han Jie and Ling Qi.

Seeing his return, Yang Yu and Dan Meimei were the first to voice their discontent, while everyone else chimed in, blaming him for having taken so long.



The way Xiang Shaolong felt now as opposed to earlier was tremendously different. He first greeted Qiu Risheng and the others, before willingly accepting a cup of wine in punishment, so as to appease the 'public indignation'.

When Qiu Risheng toasted him, his expression was extraordinarily cold and calm. An Jinliang and Chang Jie showed hints of hostility on their faces as well. Unexpectedly, although Guo Xin was slightly less than ardent, Xiang Shaolong could feel that Guo Xin was grateful towards him in Guo Xin's courteous toast.

Lao Ai clearly wasn't pleased with the attitudes of Qiu Risheng and his men. He constantly signaled with his eyes, but Qiu Risheng pretended not to notice as the atmosphere immediately began to change.

At this time, Xiang Shaolong noticed that Dan Meimei's pretty eyes, which gazed towards him at times, were filled with a hidden hatred and detestation. He secretly exclaimed that that the power of suggestion really was powerful. Because he had resolved to never believe Wu Fu's words again, his entire impression of her had changed.

Right now, there were eight feasts going on in the pavilion. Only Xiang Shaolong alone was missing a female companion.

At this moment, the food was served. The chopsticks were made of silver, as a guard against people using poison.

Lao Ai said: "Master Hu never comes to visit friends empty-handed. On this trip to Xianyang, he brought several groups of world-class beauties in a song-and-dance troop, so as to

broaden our horizons. The primary leader, Shi Sufang, is known as the Lady of Three Perfections, referring to her voice, her looks, and her artistic skill, which have mesmerized the world."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly astonished. From Lao Ai's words, he could tell that this was a travelling group of professional, independent entertainers, not subject or subordinate to any organization. At this place and time, when everyone is fighting for advantage, how was it possible that Shi Sufang was able to keep their liberty and perform wherever they please?

In this ancient era, aside from the common folk, everyone had a political scheme or plan. Logically speaking, this entertainment group was not an exception. For them to be able to link up with Pu Hu was showed that they were not a simple group at all.

Pu Hu contentedly said: "It took me two months of time and effort as well as a personal trip to Hanye to visit Boss Jin, the master of this troop, and present him with rich gifts before I was able to convince him to take his troop here to Xianyang. I have already arranged for them to put on a presentation at the Spring Sacrifices, so as to liven up the place. We can consider this to be a preview performance."

Qiu Risheng interrupted: "I heard that the 'Lady of Three Perfections', Shi Sufang, along with the 'Soft Boned Beauty', Fu Gongyuan, who performed at the Premier Mentor's residence the other night, and the country of Yan's 'Exquisite

Swallow' Feng Fei, are known as the 'Three Legendary Courtesans'. Who would've imagined that two of them would be in Xianyang at the same time? We really are blessed with good fortune."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that the soft boned beauty who had attempted to assassinate him the other night was named Fu Gongyuan.

Of the Three Legendary Courtesans, at least one of them was a remarkable female assassin.

What of the other two?

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but feel curious.

Lao Ai grinned lecherously: "I imagine that the Premier Mentor has tasted the loveliness of the Soft-Boned Beauty. I wonder if Boss Pu has tried Shi Sufang's 'Three Perfections' in the bedroom, and if he would be willing to reveal a bit to us?"

All of them men roared in laughter, while all of the girls laughed while ridiculing him. They were all used to these men speaking such brazen words and all knew the proper way to respond.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing inside. One of the reasons of Lao Ai's eventual downfall was the fact that he only had these lecherous men as his subordinates.

Pu Hu first laughed alongside everyone else, before responding: "If it was so easy to gain her favor, Shi Sufang would've been taken into someone's private residence long

ago. Every time Shi Sufang comes to a place, she always must have a guarantee that no one will force her to sell herself. On this trip, the guarantor is myself. How could I be a mean, contemptible man who will rob what I have been assigned to guard?"

An Jinliang, seated behind Qiu and Guo, was chewing on a chicken leg. He vaguely muttered out: "What a shame, what a waste!"

Instantly, everyone roared in laughter once more.

At this point in time, Yang Yu rose to her feet. Carrying a wine flagon, she walked towards Xiang Shaolong. First her knees touched the floor, before she sat down on his leg. Laughing beautifully, she said: "Master Xiang, please allow your servant to offer you a toast!"

Xiang Shaolong casually raised his glass, allowing her to fill it.

Lao Ai laughed: "Since Miss Yang shows such interest in Master Xiang, then Master Xiang should just accept her. I can guarantee that her 'Three Perfections' in the bedroom is not a whit inferior to Shi Sufang."

Everyone laughed again, adding fuel to the flames. Only Qiu Risheng and the others revealed a look of disdain, showing that he still held a grudge against Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong saw that this charming, mesmerizing beauty was blushing, her head lowered. Even if she was just putting on an act, he still felt deeply moved. This was the normal reaction any man would have towards a beauty. The thought

that she might be as venomous as a serpent's fangs added a dangerous, flaming spice to the mixture.

In the midst of the laughter, Yang Yu lifted her beautiful face to gaze up at him through her mesmerizing eyes, before lowering her head again. She lightly whispered: "If Master Xiang is able to find a little free time, Yang Yu is willing to attend to you on the pillow mat."

Those two lines were spoken very softly and delicately. Only Xiang Shaolong could hear them, adding an indescribable spice.

Xiang Shaolong's gaze travelled across her firm, crisp bosom, and almost agreed out of hand. But fortunately, over the past few days, he had been getting up every morning to practice his martial arts, and in the process had fortified his willpower immensely. In a gentle voice, he said: "It is difficult to untie the knots in one's heart. Miss Yang, please forgive me."

Yang Yu's scorching gaze trailed across his face with the hidden bitterness of a young woman thwarted in love, before returning to Lao Ai's side.

Xiang Shaolong voluntarily raised his cup and offered a toast to everyone. Everyone loudly toasted in him return. But in Qiu Risheng's party, aside from Guo Xin, everyone appeared forced, clearly just going through the motions.

Afterwards, Qiu Risheng and Pu Hu toasted each other.

Just as Xiang Shaolong thought that it was strange how Lao

Ai was totally unable to control Qiu Risheng, he saw Pu Hu and Qiu Risheng exchange knowing, secretive smiles. In a flash, he understood Qiu Risheng and Lao Ai's relationship.

Qiu Risheng used to be Lord Yangquan's man, who favored Xiao Pan's "younger brother", Cheng Qiao. Now, he still favored Cheng Qiao, but decided to conspire with Du Bi and Pu Hu instead.

Du Bi and Pu Hu's influence was great, but was concentrated in the three eastern provinces. That had become Cheng Qiao's bastion of power.

This was the result of Lu Buwei's handiwork; he had intentionally allowed this situation to come about, so as to force Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji to rely on him to deal with them.

But Du Bi and the others wanted to make inroads into Xianyang, which is why he had Qiu Risheng and the others pretend to ally with Lao Ai, causing both Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji to be unable to touch them.

The strange, complicated relationship was as simple as that. Naturally, he wouldn't reveal this precious knowledge which he had suddenly acquired to Lao Ai.

Lu Buwei was playing a game of 'balance of power'. He had no choice but to play along as well.

After gaining this understanding, Xiang Shaolong instantly realized that he had become the primary antagonist for Du Bi, Pu Hu, and Qiu Risheng to attack.

With his death, they could immediately smash apart the balance of power maintained by the various powerful interests in Xianyang.

To Du Bi and Pu Hu, naturally, the more chaos there was, the better for them.

Right now, there were more than a few people in the military command structure of Qin who opposed Lu Buwei. If Du Bi was able to ally with several of the most powerful people, such as Wang He, Wang Ling, Wang Jian, Lord Changping, or Lords An, Gu, and Xi, Cheng Qiao would be in a powerful position to fight with the ruler which Lu Buwei superficially supported, Xiao Pan.

Once they got rid of Xiao Pan, Cheng Qiao would naturally become the successor to the throne of Qin. And the first thing to do as part of that plan would be to get rid of him, Xiang Shaolong, throwing Xianyang into chaos. Only then, with the waters muddied, would they be able to snatch the biggest fish of all, Xiao Pan.

Right at this moment, he saw Qiu Risheng repeatedly signal to Guo Xin with his eyes. After a long time, Guo Xin somewhat unwillingly said: "Great General, would you be willing to come to our school in the next few days to display your sabre skill to all of us and broaden our horizons?"

The words were the same, but compared to the way in which Guo Xin spoke those words at the Drunken Wind Pavilion the night before the great duel, there was no longer that sense of danger and tension. From this, one could tell

that Ji Yanran's kindness and Xiao Pan's promotion of him had moved him at least a little.

When it comes down to it, at this moment in time, Xiao Pan was ascendant and all authority was concentrated in him. In the past, it was Guo Xin decision to follow Lord Yangquan which resulted in him being given no path to join Xiang Shaolong's side. Right now, given this wonderful opportunity, for him to sacrifice it on Qiu Risheng's behalf really was asking quite a lot from him.

Before Xiang Shaolong had a chance to speak, Lao Ai feigned ignorance and said: "Master Guo, haven't you already personally witnessed Great General Xiang's godlike sabre skills? Why do you insist on seeing it yet another time?"

These words were extremely impolite. Clearly, Lao Ai was extremely unhappy.

Qiu Risheng laughed loudly: "It's precisely because the Great General's sabre skills are godlike, that we want him to go to our school and display it to our children. Inner Custodian, you misunderstood."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "If tomorrow, Headmaster Qiu is willing to personally enter the arena, then no matter what, I Xiang Shaolong will be at the school to be instructed by you."

After these words came out, everyone's face immediately changed, including Pu Hu's.

Although these words were very politely said, they clearly



showed that Xiang Shaolong had the intention of killing Qiu Risheng. And, afterwards, no one would dare to investigate, because Qiu Risheng would have no one to blame but himself.

The reason Pu Hu and Qiu Risheng's expressions changed was because they felt that Xiang Shaolong had already seen through to the real nature of the relationship between them and Lao Ai, which is why he was being so merciless.

The reason Lao Ai and his companion's expressions changed was because based on Qiu Risheng's reputation, after Xiang Shaolong said these words, even if Qiu Risheng knew that he was going to be defeated, all he could do was stiffen his spine and do battle, without any recourse whatsoever.

Dan Meimei and the other girls were absolutely stunned by Xiang Shaolong's awe-inspiring aura, a heroic spirit seen once in a generation. Their fragrant hearts beat faster.

Qiu Risheng really did raise his head to the sky and laugh loudly, before heroically saying: "In recent years, there hasn't been a single person like Master Xiang, who is willing to exchange a few stances with this Headmaster. Tomorrow at noon, I will respectfully await your presence within the school."

After he was finished speaking, he immediately rose. He bowed towards Pu Hu and Lao Ai before flicking his sleeves and leaving.

Guo Xin and the others had no other choice but to bow as well, before following him out.

The atmosphere in the courtyard immediately became extremely awkward.

Everyone glanced at one another. None of them had expected Qiu Risheng to be so intolerant and so petty. At this moment, his face filled with doubt, Wu Fu walked in, before turning and watching Qiu Risheng and the others depart.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Has Owner Wu come to take Meimei away and bring her to meet with the Premier Mentor?"

Lao Ai and Wu Fu's faces simultaneously appeared shocked.

## CHAPTER 5

## The Beauty of Three Perfections

[Translated by REN WO XING]

WU FU's legs went soft, and he collapsed into a kneeling position.

He honestly had no idea what had just happened before his very eyes just now.

All he knew was that Xiang Shaolong had exposed his intentions with a single sentence. As he had a guilty conscience, he felt like a man who was previously wrapped in thick clothes, who had been suddenly stripped naked without a single garment to protect his modesty.

Although Xiang Shaolong had only seen past a single part of his intentions, Wu Fu felt as though Xiang Shaolong knew everything.

Although he hadn't consciously thought of the repercussions, his sub-consciousness realized that if his mean, base, contemptible actions were revealed to Xiang Shaolong and the Crown Prince, his entire family line would be exterminated.

Thus, his act of kneeling down sprang from his subconscious mind.

The reason Lao Ai's face changed was because Wu Fu had deceived him.

Earlier, Wu Fu had lied to him and told him that Dan Meimei wasn't feeling well, and so had to retire early. Naturally, she wouldn't be able to accompany him for the entire night tonight. Who would have imagined that it was a lie, so that she could go and be with the Premier Mentor. This really was intolerable and unforgivable.

Although he thought it was strange that Xiang Shaolong knew that Dan Meimei was going to accompany the Lu Buwei, his fury surpassed his sense of curiosity.

Only Dan Meimei had guessed a little bit! Everyone else stared at Wu Fu in total astonishment as he knelt there on the ground, not understanding what had happened. Xiang Shaolong said, 'astonished': "Owner Wu, did you do something wrong? As the saying goes, 'A man without a guilty conscience won't be afraid if someone knocks on his

door at night.' But Owner Wu, you look like the exact opposite. After a single sentence, you knelt down. Why is this?"

Wu Fu was sly, crafty old fox. After calming down, he cursed himself secretly for being cowardly and acting in such a guilty manner. He hurriedly jumped up before coughing drily: "I just lost my footing momentarily and accidentally fell to my knees. I hope that everyone here will not laugh at me."

Lao Ai coldly snorted: "Owner Wu, I'm sure that you didn't come here in accordance with what Master Xiang said, with the intention of taking Meimei to see the Premier Mentor, right?"

Wu Fu's fear of Lao Ai was far less than his dread of Xiang Shaolong. He hurriedly said: "That really is the truth. But if the Inner Custodian is not happy, I will go and refuse the Premier Mentor right away."

At the moment, Wu Fu was still badly shaken. All he wanted to do was escape quickly and discover how Xiang Shaolong found out about this affair. One of the possibilities, naturally, was that Xiang Shaolong's men had discovered Lu Buwei's arrival.

Dan Meimei let out a light, bell-like laugh. After dispersing the tense atmosphere, she sweetly said: "Great General Xiang, when you took a stroll outside earlier, did you run into the Premier Mentor?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that Dan Meimei was using this

method to communicate to Wu Fu that he was not to worry, and that Xiang Shaolong hadn't seen through all their secrets. Just from this point alone! One could tell that Dan Meimei really was on Lu Buwei's side. He calmly said: "I didn't see the Premier Mentor, but my subordinates did see some of his followers, which is why I made a wild guess. How could I have known that it would cause Owner Wu to fall to his knees?"

Only now did Wu Fu and the others feel relieved, while Xiang Shaolong laughed inside.

Lao Ai reached out and grabbed Dan Meimei by her slender waist before barking towards Wu Fu: "Owner Wu, do you know how you should proceed?"

Wu Fu lowered his head in response and awkwardly left the pavilion.

Pu Hu raised his glass in a toast: "'A man without a guilty conscience won't be afraid if someone knocks on his door at night.' I've never heard this interesting phrase before. General Xiang's words are as precious and marvelous as pearls. Pu Hu offers you a toast!"

Everyone had the same feeling and uniformly toasted Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly inside. He knew that he had once more used a phrase which came from after this period of time. Pu Hu intentionally repeated those two lines, showing that he had seen straight through Wu Fu's evil designs and guilty conscience.

By this time, everyone was feeling at least a little tipsy. Lao Ai laughed: "Why don't we forget about what is to happen tomorrow, and instead enjoy the astonishing performance of Shi Sufang, one of the Three Legendary Courtesans!"

Xiang Shaolong raised his cup in response: "Tonight, there is wine, so tonight, let us drink; if there are troubles tomorrow, then let me worry about them tomorrow. Let's take another cup!"

Everyone, including Dan Meimei and the other ladies, held their breath as they awaited Shi Sufang's arrival.

Even Xiang Shaolong was secretly in awe of her reputation as having reached 'Three Perfections', and waited for her with great anticipation.

The troop consisted of eighteen women. They entered as a group, some playing the flute, others beating the drums, causing many interweaving, exotic melodies to be heard at the same time. They danced as they played, their graceful, lithesome bodies pleasing to the eye.

They were all young, jade-like beauties. They wore short sleeved gowns which, when matched with the music and their dance, was extremely mesmerizing.

Suddenly, the music changed. Two rows of eight beautiful dancing courtesans holding dancing fans appeared, wearing a thin, light gauze as they danced their way into the pavilion, through the main door. Their movements were fluid and graceful as their bodies formed all sorts of artificial patterns and designs. All of the men watching sighed with admiration

as they watched.

Although Qin was the strongest nation at this time, when it comes to culture and the arts, how can it compare to the rest of the Six Nations?

Dan Meimei and the other girls were the number one entertainers and dancers of Qin, but when they saw these girls from the eastern dance troop, they couldn't help but feel that they didn't match up.

The most exciting thing was that beneath the gauze could be faintly seen the image of a short-sleeved red dress. Their bare shoulder were as white as snow, their arms were jade-like and their legs as white as powder. All of them men watching stared, their eyes shining. Lao Si, that lustful pervert, was all the more salivating.

Xiang Shaolong seized the opportunity to see everyone's reactions. Although Lao Ai, Ling Qi, Han Jie, and the others had not lost self-control like Lao Si had, they were all stunned as they watched. Only Pu Hu's expression was calm and icy. From this, one could tell that the appearance he put on was totally for the purpose of giving others a false impression.

After thousands and tens of thousands of transformations, the two dancing groups reformed into one large group. Cooing sweetly beneath the eaves of the roofs, they burst out into incomparably beautiful song.

Xiang Shaolong didn't understand a single word of what they were singing. Just as he was pondering, the dancers



suddenly flew to the four corners like butterflies as a woman of incomparable beauty awe-inspiringly appeared right in the middle.

Nobody had seen this beauty arrive, or when she had entered the group of dancers. Only when Pu Hu led them in clapping did they awaken from their stupor and began to cheer as well.

This beauty wore a fresh yellow flowered skirt, and on her feet she wore a pair of embroidered silk slippers. On her head, she wore a hairpin with the seal of a hawkbill turtle! On her ears, she wore a pair of beautiful pearl earrings, while around her powdered neck, she wore a chain of linked pearls. Every inch of her body was shiny and trembled, alongside every movement of her towering, erect, firm bosom! Thin silk streamers covered her slender, graceful arms and legs. Her skin was as white as silk satin, and her body was perfectly proportioned, giving her an irresistible allure.

She had a beautiful, melon-seed shaped face, within which was set a pair of brilliant, pearl-like eyes. Beneath her beautiful dimples was a pair of luscious lips, which looked like they had been painted scarlet red by the hands of heaven itself. She was beautiful, gorgeous, and full of vitality and life, but didn't appear vulgar in the slightest.

Although she sat on the ground and didn't move, her posture alone caused everyone to feel that she was a refined, elegant lady of peerless dexterity. Her long, white

neck left the deepest impression on Xiang Shaolong, especially the way she held it up loftily, giving her an incomparably noble, ladylike aura. Even the likes of Qin Qing and Ji Yanran could be considered at most a hair better than her.

The pose which Shi Sufang struck was just like that of the sun beginning to rise in the morning. All of the spectators, male or female, couldn't control the awe they felt for her peerless, world-class beauty, poise, and appearance.

The other dancers had already seated themselves in a circle around her. They gently fluttered peacock fans about her, letting onlookers know quite clearly that she was the real heart and soul of the troupe.

Shi Sufang appeared to be wholly unaware that she had become the center of attention for everyone in the room. She sat as though she were alone in her boudoir. After turning around and showing on a few soul-stirring expressions on her face and in her posture, she slowly began to sing.

From Shi Sufang's red lips came a most graceful, delicate, beautiful voice, which felt like the flying clouds or the running water. Her voice flowed out as though pushed by incessant waves, and the notes seemed to hang and linger in the heavy, silent air. Not only were the notes reluctant to leave; the people listening were unable to leave as well.

Xiang Shaolong was a person who originally knew nothing of music, but in recent years, thanks to Ji Yanran's influence, he

had learned a thing or two. Now, hearing her dreary, remote song, a beautiful image appeared in his mind. He visualized a goddess hidden within a secluded valley, bobbing up and down in the waves of the river, passionately singing to her own beautiful reflection in the water. The beauty and emotions evoked by her song was not one whit inferior to those evoked by Ji Yanran with the flute.

The song she was picking came from the poem, 'Picking Royal Ferns', of the 'Book of Odes'. It portrayed the letters and poems kept in the hearts of generals and soldiers as they went entered the field of war, repeatedly singing the words, "Picking royal ferns, picking royal ferns." The next segment portrayed the remembrances and recollections of old generals and soldiers. Nobody could resist the power of that lingering, plaintive melody.

Although her voice seemed both smooth and choppy, solid and vacant, it was extraordinarily clear, and her enunciation was perfect, so that the listeners wouldn't miss a single word. Her voice became fine and delicate once she reached the lines, "When I departed in the past, the weeping willows beckoned to me, as though they were unwilling for us to part. Today I have returned, as the rain and snow falls thick and fast. My movements are slow, for I suffer from both thirst and hunger. My heart is full of sorrow, and you know not my pain." Slowly, her voice died away with the music, drifting off to a place far away, filled with thousands of mountains and tens of thousands of rivers. Just at this moment, the other dancers pressed forward, screening her

body with their own until she totally disappeared. Then, as a group, they departed from the entrance way.

Everyone was so moved that they forgot to applaud or cheer.

Xiang Shaolong had been totally enraptured as well, all of his senses lost.

Just as everyone was lost in the throes of a silent daze, a large, forty-something year old man with gaudy clothes walked in. Bowing, he said: "Jin Cheng pays his respect to Boss Pu and everyone else present."

Pu Hu, recovering his senses, laughed: "This person is Boss Jin. It's all thanks to his rigorous training efforts that everyone present had the fortune to listen to that divine, heavenly melody."

Next, he introduced everyone to Boss Jin.

Lao Ai joyfully said: "Someone, give Boss Jin ten taels of gold!" One of his servants immediately gave the gold to Boss Jin.

Xiang Shaolong secretly pondered to himself that Lao Ai must recently have acquired a great deal of money, as he otherwise wouldn't be so free with his gold.

Just as Boss Jin was profusely thanking Lao Ai, Pu Hu delicately asked: "Is Miss Shi feeling well tonight? Could you invite her to come out and chat with us for a short while, so that we might properly thank her for her moving performance?"

Boss Jin clearly was used to handling such questions. Intentionally putting on a mysterious air, he said softly: "This girl of mine definitely cannot be rushed. Let me find the proper time to arrange a meeting between her and all of you here. I guarantee I will handle this."

Only then did everyone let out a breath.

Dan Meimei and the rest of the Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion all had faint looks of disdain on their faces, as though they were contemptuous of the airs that Shi Sufang was putting on. But deep in their hearts, they were all insanely jealous of the way in which she had mesmerized every single person here.

In terms of appearance alone, Dan Meimei really was only very slightly inferior to Shi Sufang. But in singing, she was a large step behind. And when it came to presentation and image, she was even farther behind. If this was all planned out by Boss Jin's "producers", then Boss Jin really was a formidable person.

Boss Jin turned towards Xiang Shaolong: "This girl of mine has always been extremely arrogant and her gaze has always been high. But she's been quite interested towards Master Xiang. Tonight, after she heard that you were coming, she was extremely happy and even sang her most famous song."

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly disagreed modestly. At the same time, he cursed fiercely to himself. Earlier, when she was singing, Shi Sufang hadn't even glanced at him. Clearly, Boss Jin made this claim at Pu Hu's instigation, with the intention

of arousing jealousy and envy between him and Lao Ai.

A look of hatred really did flash by Lao Ai's eyes. Laughing loudly, he said: "If that's the case, then Boss Jin only needs to arrange for Miss Shi to meet privately with Master Xiang. Bystanders like us are just ruining the moment for them."

Xiang Shaolong really wanted to give Boss Jin two hard slaps, while simultaneously feeling startled at how Pu Hu was able to gain victory without firing a shot, using this evil scheme.

This particularly tactic was more effective against Lao Ai than anyone else.

Lao Ai had always been jealous about the relationship between Xiang Shaolong and Zhu Ji. Thus, these words of Boss Jin struck directly at his most sensitive spot.

Xiang Shaolong turned sideways to glance at Lao Ai and forced out a smile: "Master Lao, please don't take Boss Jin's words to be the truth. I think the truth is that Miss Shi doesn't care about anyone at all."

Lao Ai let out two dry chuckles. Clearly, he still felt uncomfortable.

The happiest person, naturally, was Pu Hu. Raising his cup, he urged everyone to drink.

Boss Jin took the chance to depart.

Shortly afterwards, Wu Fu returned. He brought with him Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, and Xu Shang. They had escorted Boss Jin back as well.

Everyone present felt astonished, and they traded confused glances.

Lu Buwei, arriving at the center of the room, swept all of the guests with his gaze. His eyes alighted on Lao Ai, and he laughed loudly: "I came here today to force the Inner Custodian to drink three cups of wine as punishment."

Lao Ai, Xiang Shaolong, and the others all immediately saluted him, as Dan Meimei and the other women prostrated themselves on the floor.

In the past, Lao Ai had always lived under Lu Buwei's tyrannical rule. It was true that he now had the support of Zhu Ji and had flown to higher places. When Lu Buwei wasn't around, Lao Ai could flaunt his might, but when faced with his old patron directly, he seemed to have shrunk in size by half. Haltingly, he said: "Why is it that the Premier Mentor has come to punish this humble official?"

Lu Buwei stroked his beard and laughed: "Shaolong, Boss Hu, and beautiful ladies present. You be my witnesses and my judges. Let me enumerate his crimes, one by one, and you tell me if I'm fair or not."

Xu Shang shouted from behind Lu Buwei: "Why haven't you poured the wine for the Inner Custodian yet?"

Lu Buwei happily said: "Beauties, be seated!"

The ladies all began to sit in accordance with his orders.

Dan Meimei picked up the wine-kettle, while Yang Yu collected a cup. They filled it with wine before delivering it

to Lao Ai, who looked like a mouse faced with a cat.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly full of admiration. As soon as Lu Buwei appeared, his reputation and prestige alone was sufficient to cow everyone present, and he totally seized the initiative.

Boss Jin, who had been 'dragged' back, stood besides Wu Fu, his head covered in sweat. He had no clue what had just happened.

When Lao Ai's subordinates, Han Jie, Ling Qi and Lao Si saw that even Pu Hu and Xiang Shaolong had fallen silent and were rendered hoarse, they knew that they had even less space to interrupt.

Guan Zhongxie, standing to the other side of Lu Buwei, revealed a trace of a smile on his lips. His manner and bearing was natural and self-composed. No one could tell that he had been defeated by Xiang Shaolong's sabre just a few days ago.

Lu Buwei clasped his hands behind his back. He casually strode forward, stopping directly in front of Lao Ai. Smiling, he said: "The first crime is this: You knew that I, the Premier Mentor, had come to the Drunken Wind Pavilion. And yet, you didn't even come by to greet me. When did the relationship between us become no different than that of two strangers?"

Lao Ai felt extremely awkward. Forcing out a laugh, he replied: "I deserve to be punished! I deserve to be punished!"



Raising his cup, he drank the first glass of wine.

Pu Hu, watching Dan Meimei fill the second cup for Lao Ai, laughed loudly: "The Premier Mentor should have punished all of us present with this first cup of wine."

Lu Buwei shook his head and laughed: "How would the Premier Mentor dare to punish Boss Pu? But it's entirely natural and reasonable for me to punish Little Lao. Isn't that right, Inner Custodian?"

A furious flame erupted in Lao Ai's eyes. These words were clearly intended to say that he was a person who forgot other's benevolence towards him. Lowering his head, he said in a low voice: "The Premier Mentor's words are naturally never wrong. But I don't know what the reason is behind this second cup?"

Lu Buwei's gaze fell upon Xiang Shaolong. Smiling, he said: "Shaolong foretells with miraculous accuracy. Why don't you guess first?"

Xiang Shaolong exchanged glances with Lao Ai. Forcing out a smile, he said: "Premier Mentor, you act in unpredictably brilliant ways. How can I possibly predict what the reason is?"

Lu Buwei felt extremely delighted. Under everyone's attentive gaze, he began to walk back towards the place where he originally stood. As he reached the main entrance, he turned around and laughed towards everyone: "The second punishment is related to the reason behind the first punishment. Earlier, I ran into Boss Jin and discovered that

Little Lao had secretly arranged for everyone to come here and enjoy the songs and dances of the Lady of Three Perfections. Why is it that Little Lao didn't invite me, Lu Buwei, to partake of this rare opportunity?"

Guan Zhongxie chimed in: "Naturally, I'm not qualified to punish Little Lao, but I still can't help but blame Little Lao for not being a good enough friend."

Lao Ai was mocked by them repeatedly, and in addition, time and time again, they belittled him by addressing him as 'Little Lao', as they had in the past. His face grew very ugly to behold. But unfortunately, at this point in time, his power and influence was still weaker than Lu Buwei's. All he could do was to swallow his rage, forcing it down along with the second glass of punishment wine. Letting out a sigh, he said: "Please forgive me, but this lowly official really cannot fathom what the third glass of punishment wine is for."

Pu Hu, frowning, stared at Lao and at Lu. Head in a fog, he clearly didn't understand why Lu Buwei had come to openly humiliate Lao Ai.

Only Xiang Shaolong vaguely guessed the real reason. Lu Buwei had used Wu Fu to try and deceive Xiang Shaolong, so that they might link hands and simultaneously attack Lao Ai. The tip of this spear was really directed at Zhu Ji.

If Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei were to link hands and attack Lao Ai together, even Zhu Ji wouldn't be able to protect him.

Thinking one layer deeper, Lu Buwei clearly was trying to feel out Xiang Shaolong, testing to see if he had fallen for

their trick.

When he realized this, Xiang Shaolong's heart was suddenly moved: "If the third glass of wine has to do with Miss Meimei, I would like to ask the Premier Mentor to spare the Inner Custodian and not speak the reason aloud, to the satisfaction of all. Everyone will be able to depart happily to their own homes and go to sleep."

This time, it was Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie's turn to start slightly. Clearly, Xiang Shaolong's words struck home.

Dan Meimei's flowery countenance lost all color. Darting a glance at Xiang Shaolong, she knelt down on the floor, her slender figure quivering.

Lao Ai suddenly realized what was happening. Lu Buwei was about to openly express his intention of taking Dan Meimei as his concubine. If Lao Ai were to continue fighting with Lu Buwei over this woman, he naturally would be committing a grievous sin in betraying the previous benevolence Lu Buwei had shown him by promoting him.

The courtyard became so quiet that even a leaf falling could be heard.

Lu Buwei was, after all, a once-in-a-generation figure. He was able to live and let live. Raising his thumb towards Xiang Shaolong, he praised: "Shaolong remains the most capable! Because of your words, I, the Premier Mentor, shall rescind the third cup of punishment wine."

Following this, he coldly shouted: "Meimei, return to your

room for now. I shall go visit you soon."

Dan Meimei anxiously glanced at Lao Ai, whose face was as pale and ghastly as a corpse. Lowering her head, she stood up. Suddenly, tears began to flow as she fled from the room.

Han Jie pressed his hand against his sword as he glanced at Lao Ai. Clearly, all Lao Ai had to do was signal him with his eyes, and he would immediately strike.

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang gripped the hilts of their swords as well, but intentionally did not look at Han Jie, pretending not to see anything.

The hall was filled with a murderous aura.

Lao Ai's eyes flashed with fierce light, but he immediately restrained himself. Sighing, he slowly said: "It's getting late. Everyone should go home and get some rest."

Lu Buwei raised his face to the heavens. Letting out a single loud laugh, he then bade Pu Hu and Xiang Shaolong farewell before turning away and leaving, with Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang following him.

Lao Ai was silent for a long moment, before shaking his head and smiling bitterly: "Right now, I just want to step outside, take a walk, and enjoy some fresh air."

Xiang Shaolong also let out a sigh, but it was because he suddenly felt relaxed. The powder keg of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's opposition to each other had been ignited by the blasting fuse of Dan Meimei, and they would now be openly against each other.



## CHAPTER 6

## Rays of Light Shooting in All Directions

[Translated by REN WO XING]

LAO AI and Xiang Shaolong rode out together, their horses leisurely pacing through the ancient streets of Xianyang.

The Eighteen Guardians acted as their vanguard, clearing the road in front of them, while Lao Ai's personal bodyguards followed behind.

Because an assassination attempt had been made not long ago, everyone was on high alert and dared not to be relaxed.

Han Jie, Lao Si, and Ling Qi followed directly behind the two

of them, but there was still some distance between them, allowing the two of them to freely exchange their innermost thoughts and plans. The last traces of humility slid away from Lao Ai's face, leaving behind a silent face, frozen like ice.

After riding for the space of time it takes to drink half a cup of tea, Lao Ai, staring at the next street down which was covered in torchlight, said in a low voice, "Lu Buwei really goes way too far."

Xiang Shaolong listened to the sound of their horses hooves echo in the silent street. Sighing, he said, "Given the current situation, I would recommend that the Inner Custodian continue to exercise restraint for now! There's no need to directly clash with him for the sake of a woman."

Lao Ai ground his teeth. "Brother Xiang, didn't you see that look of helplessness and pain on Meimei's face? Her heart is actually with me."

Xiang Shaolong, recalling the look in Dan Meimei's eyes as she left while crying, couldn't help but imagine her beautiful torso being pressed down by Lu Buwei's foul body. Smiling bitterly, he couldn't give voice to what he wanted to say.

With a quiet growl, Lao Ai spoke the words in Shaolong's mind. "I am going to kill Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong glanced aside at Lao Ai, just as Lao Ai turned to look at him. After the exchange of glances, Xiang Shaolong said, "Let's not discuss the question of whether or not you can kill him. First, please consider that if Lu Buwei were to

actually die, Qin would immediately fall into chaos. Brother Lao, please reconsider."

Lao Ai's lips tightened, as though he had tasted something bitter, and he let out a depressed sigh.

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong also sighed.

He really was too sentimental. Even though he knew that Lao Ai was a man who was as rapacious as a wolf and savage as a dog, and was filled with malice towards himself, he still felt pity for him upon seeing him be oppressed by Lu Buwei. He decided that really wasn't the right sort of person to get involved in politics. He was too soft-hearted towards his enemies.

At this moment, they arrived at a four-way intersection. To the left was the Ganquan Palace of the south, while the path in front led to Xiang Shaolong's home. Lao Ai halted his horse, and the entire procession came to a halt as well.

Xiang Shaolong knew all too well that Lao Ai was headed towards the Ganquan Palace, so as to complain to Zhuji while in bed with her. He instantly felt extremely uncomfortable.

With an effort, Lao Ai forced his spirits to rouse. "Brother Xiang, are you intending to kill Qiu Risheng tomorrow?"

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but give Lao Ai a little bit of face on this matter. Smiling, he replied, "Brother Lao, I'll listen to your instructions on this matter."

Lao Ai didn't expect Xiang Shaolong to be so willing to give



him face. Shocked, he said, "Brother Xiang, you really are a good friend. I know all too well that Qiu Risheng really went too far today. But he still remains slightly useful to me. Brother Xiang, please just teach him a lesson!"

Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "I will act as you request, brother Lao."

Seizing the opportunity, he asked, "What is the nature of the relationship between yourself and Pu Hu, brother Lao?"

Lao Ai frowned, responding only after a long pause. "Right now, he is desperately fawning on me and trying to gain my favor. I don't see any risk in him doing so, which is why I accepted him. This man has an enormous amount of influence in both Qin and Zhao. In the past, he always colluded with Lord Yangquan. Now he is lacking a powerful supporter. After seeing that Du Bi isn't that useful, it's natural that he would look for a different patron."

Upon hearing these words, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew that Pu Hu had given Lao Ai many great gifts. He decided not to expose him.

After bidding each other farewell, the two of them went their separate ways.

By the time he returned to the Wu family manor, it was around nine or ten at night. Many rooms were still lit, showing that most people had not yet gone to sleep. Wu Guo was preparing to escort Zou Yan out of Qin. Zou Yan was dearly beloved by every single person in the Wu household. At this moment, Zou Yan was in the main

courtyard, energetically discussing the sights they would see on this trip. Listening to him talk, Ji Yanran, Zhao Da, and the others couldn't help but burst into laughter time and time again. He was one of those people who could take an extremely dull topic and make people very excited and be willing to discuss it. Everyone looked cheerful, while the Tian sisters laughed hardest.

Teng Yi and Shan Lan sat off to one side in a corner, enjoying the friendly atmosphere. Because Jing Jun was on night duty tonight, he wasn't present.

After spending so much time in a backstabbing, deceitful atmosphere, Xiang Shaolong felt his heart grow warm as he returned to this loving, friendly place.

Seeing him return, Wu Guo hurriedly stood up and saluted. "Master Xiang has returned after a night of hard drinking!" As soon as he spoke, everyone present roared with laughter.

Teng Yi stood up. Laughing, he said, "It's late! Let's talk tomorrow!"

Everyone departed merrily, leaving only Ji Yanran and the other ladies, Teng Yi, and his wife.

Ji Yanran gave him a glance. "I thought that milord husband wouldn't be returning tonight."

Protesting innocence, Xiang Shaolong said, "Worthy wife, did you think that I wanted to fool around with the likes of Lao Ai and his men? But in truth, tonight was a very profitable night."

Teng Yi immediately questioned him, and Xiang Shaolong explained all which had happened.

Shan Lan angrily said, "Lu Buwei really is a shameless scoundrel. But Lao Ai isn't exactly a good person either. It'd be best if they both dropped dead."

But Wu Tingfang was interested in something else entirely. "Was Shi Sufang very beautiful?"

Xiang Shaolong tactfully replied, "I suppose she's not bad, but how can she be compared to our Fang'er's beauty?"

Wu Tingfang immediately beamed with joy and no longer questioned him.

Teng Yi said in a solemn voice, "Third Brother, tomorrow, are you really going to forego your plan of killing Qiu Risheng, all for Lao Ai's sake?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed. "Thinking on a deeper level, it isn't a good time to get rid of Qiu Risheng. The more foes Lu Buwei has, the better."

Changing the topic, he asked Ji Yanran about how the Black Dragon was proceeding.

Beautiful eyes flashing, Ji Yanran leisurely replied, "With Yanran in charge, milord husband should set his mind at ease."

Teng Yi stood up. Stretching lazily, he said, "Everyone should go get some early rest so we will be energetic tomorrow. Tomorrow, we'll go to that failure of a martial school and

show everyone that we aren't to be provoked lightly."

Zhao Zhi laughed, "Our Master Xiang has now become accustomed to taking a stroll around the Drunken Wind Pavilion before battle. But this time, I think no one will dare to wager that he will lose."

Laughing, everyone retired to their rooms.

This morning, due to Spring having almost arrived and a new year to begin, every household in Qin was discussing financial matters.

Lu Buwei was in charge of handling the national economy, and had prepared a surfeit of documents long ago. A full month in advance, he had submitted a complete and detailed 'national budgetary report'.

Overall, he had increased the national income by increasing taxes, for the purposes of funding large-scale military maneuvers as well as the construction of the Zhengguo Canal.

Over the past few days, Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Changping, and Wang Ling had been engaging in nonstop private talk regarding financial matters. Because Xiang Shaolong knew nothing about finances, and had been preparing nonstop for his battle with Guan Zhongxie, he managed to avoid this unpleasant discuss.

By the time Lu Buwei had finished once more discussing his budgetary report in detail, all of the military and civil officials had been standing for four full hours. Xiao Pan, showing

uncommon generosity, had ordered people to prepare sitting mats to allow those present to sit.

After finishing his narration, Lu Buwei energetically said, "The way of finances lies in increasing what needs to be increased and decreasing what needs to be decreased; in using things appropriately. Right now, our great country of Qin is very wealthy. Our supplies of grain are piled as high as mountains, our population is flourishing, the nation is rich and powerful, the commoners are happy, and the nobles are pacified. Naturally, we should increase our revenues by increasing taxes and fearlessly advancing east. Only by continuing our conquests can Great Qin continue to be strong militarily and financially. Ever since the founding of Great Qin, this is the best opportunity for unifying the world."

When Lu Buwei sat down, all the other officials immediately followed.

Zhu Ji was definitely not particularly skilled in this area, and so could do nothing but nod.

Xiang Shaolong could tell that Lu Buwei was secretly suggesting that Qin's present successes were all due to his own hard work. Naturally, Xiang Shaolong didn't wish for Qin to whole-heartedly invade the east. But, since he had no basis of rebuking Lu Buwei, he could only sit in angry silence.

Fortunately, Xiao Pan and Li Si had come to a different conclusion through their deliberations, and so did not express approval.

The likes of Wang Wen and Cai Ze immediately rose up and sang Lu Buwei's praises, claiming him to be a brilliant statesman and a master warrior. Xiao Pan lightly said, "Left Premier, do you have any opinions?"

Lord Changping roused himself and stood up. Moving to the center of the hall, he faced the royal dais, upon which sat Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, and Lu Buwei. "Ever since Xiaogong defeated Chu and Wei, our great country of Qin has expanded our territory vastly. We have dominated Sanchuan to the east, and incorporate the territories of Ba and Shu to the west. To the north, we have tended to the Shang prefecture. To the south, we have taken over Hanzhong, pacified the nine barbarian tribes, and have restricted the movements of Zou and Chu. Meanwhile, the other six countries continue to eye us suspiciously, concerned about the rise of Great Qin. And more recently, we have taken over the three eastern provinces. Our goal right now should be to increase the prosperity of the people and consolidate our holdings. Moreover, right now, the Zhengguo Canal is costing us a large outlay of funds. A large number of farmers have been drafted to assist in the construction of the canal as well, which means their farmlands now lie barren and unused. With regards to the matter of increasing the taxes, I would like to ask the Crown Prince to consider thrice before acting."

Before Xiao Pan had a chance to express his thoughts, Wang Wen sneered, "Left Premier, your words are in error. Great Qin is a land of abundance and plenty, easy to defend and

easy to launch attacks from. To the left of the central plains are the territories of Zuowei, Han, Youlong, Shu, and Woye, which are very fertile and rich. To the south, we have the fertile grounds of Ba and Shu, while to the north we have our vast grasslands. All three of these sides are guarded by tough defenses, while the opening to the east is heavily fortified and our soldiers there well-stocked and equipped. The cost of building the Zhengguo Canal is but a drop in the bucket of our finances. The territories of Ba and Shu are more than enough to cover its costs. Crown Prince, please inspect my words for truth."

Meng Ao added, "Ever since the days of King Zhaoxiang, our Great Qin has spared no effort in advancing eastwards. Not only have we seized large swaths of territory belonging to Zhao, Wei, Han, and Chu, we have also exterminated over ten million enemy soldiers in hundreds of large battles and have greatly weakened the combat strength of the eastern kingdoms. Right now, we can see that in the Six Kingdoms, the commoners are poor, the ancestral clans are weak, and the governance is chaotic. At such a time, when they are weak and we are strong, when Great Qin holds an advantage in geography, weather, manpower, and force, if we were to waste this priceless opportunity, how could we face the late King?"

Xiang Shaolong, seeing Lord Changping's face change color several times, knew that things weren't looking good.

Although Lord Changping was resourceful and full of intelligence, but in terms of experience, how could he be a

match for the likes of Lu Buwei or Wang Wen? There would come a certain point or time in a debate when he would be unable to come up with an effective retort.

The annual budget which Lu Buwei presented today really was an effective and carefully thought out plan for seizing more power. Lu Buwei had a wide amount of discretion when it comes to collecting tax, and by increasing taxes, his control over the army's budgeting would increase as well.

As soon as Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji approved, Lu Buwei would be able to do as he pleased to benefit himself and harm others. Generals like Huan Yi would have to defer to his desires all the more.

Xiao Pan could perhaps maintain control over the three military commands in Xianyang, but all the armies outside of Xianyang would naturally fall under Lu Buwei's sway.

Thus, he absolutely had to contest this.

Lord Changping was silent for a long time, then suddenly laughed loudly. "Would Lord Li Si please come and present your findings to the Crown Prince."

He actually called Li Si to the front.

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan immediately relaxed. They knew that this was the best tactic to use in a time when one had no strategies available.

As the Senior Historian, Li Si normally should only be fit to act as Xiao Pan's secretary-general and handle his letters and documents. But now that Lord Changping had called on him



by name, it would be hard for others to object.

Wang He and Wang Ling were military officials. They were outstanding when it comes to questions of warfare and leading armies, but when it comes to politics and economics, they were far from being a match for the likes of Lu Buwei and Wang Wen. Just like Xiang Shaolong, they were unable to assist.

Only Li Si, this minister who would be legendary for thousands of years after his death, would be a suitable opponent.

Li Si was secretly elated. He gladly stepped forward towards the dais to speak in Lord Changping's stead. After paying the proper respects, he said with an air of confidence, "The unification of the world is the national strategic objective of Great Qin. No one holds any doubt about this. Right now, if this administration were to angrily rock the boat, if we aren't careful, the entire ship will capsize and all hands on board perish. Misfortune can quite easily heap upon misfortune, which is why we absolutely cannot be hasty. We should first observe the common sentiment, then act accordingly."

Cai Ze clearly held Li Si in contempt. With a somewhat disdainful air, he said, "This old minister, under the instructions of the Premier Mentor, has done a full investigation of every single prefecture in Great Qin and has assigned taxes according to local conditions. We definitely won't act rashly. The Senior Historian really worries too much."

Still beaming, Lu Buwei said, "Lord Inner Historian, if you were to personally inspect my proposed budget, you would understand that this budget which I, the Premier Mentor, have presented to the Crown Prince, is a thoroughly researched, all-encompassing budget which has cost countless man hours for accuracy's sake. Great Qin's future fortune lies within this budget. Would the Empress and the Crown Prince immediately approve it, so that we may begin our work immediately." All of the officials their chimed in with approval.

Lord Changping and the others immediately began to frown mightily.

Only Xiang Shaolong remained calm and unhurried, knowing that Li Si would definitely have a brilliant counter response.

Li Si really did smile naturally in response. "The so-called 'understanding of the public sentiment' must be grounded in fact and evidence in order for others to be convinced. According to the Premier Mentor's intentions, out of all the prefectures, Shu and Ba would have the most severe taxes. But that absolutely must not be the case."

Lu Buwei didn't expect that Li Si would dare to openly dispute with an old business boss like him. Face changing, he unhappily said, "Taxing the rich heavily, taxing the poor lightly. This is the basic, golden rule of finance. Ba and Shu are wealthy, abundant areas. Great Qin should take some of their wealth and spread it around the world. Senior Historian, why do you say such a thing?"

Li Si wasn't the slightest bit frightened by his severe words and fierce countenance. Remaining calm and composed, he said, "Ba and Shu are not just the base upon which Great Qin grows. They are also a critical strategic region. If our armies there follow the Min River south, within five days, they can arrive at the capital of the Chu kingdom. It is a critical region for any campaign to consolidate the southwest or attack Chu. In order to consolidate and strengthen our rule over Ba and Shu, we must administer it in accordance with the situation on the ground and rule with a benevolent, gentle manner. But this humble official cannot see this important point in the Premier Mentor's budget."

After pausing for a moment, he began to speak with even stronger points. "You must know that although Ba and Shu have abundant natural resources, there is a relatively small amount of people living in that wide expanse of land. Many parts of it still engage in simple, slash-and-burn cultivation of farmland. If we were to suddenly increase their taxes, I'm afraid that the people there might not be able to withstand the additional pressure, resulting in less revenue despite the increased tax rate. Furthermore, there are many barbarian tribes in Ba and Shu who are formidable warriors and who love to give battle. If popular sentiment were to be roused against us, even if we were able to quell any uprising, it would cost us greatly and increase their hatred towards us. It would be better if we were to lower the tax rate and cause the people's hearts to turn towards us. This would be the best plan. In this humble official's opinion, having a strong

and stable footing in Ba and Shu is more important than any economic considerations. Would the Crown Prince, the Empress, and the Premier Mentor please consider my words."

Xiao Pan's royal gaze immediately gleamed with light. Lifting his voice, he said, "Li Si's words are reasonable. We should first enrich the people before we take money from them. This really is correct. When considering the question of struggling for supremacy in the world, what does one or two years matter? What's more, the amount of money being spent on the Zhengguo Canal is significant, and can in no way be described as a mere 'drop in the bucket'. If we were to exhaust the resources of the two regions of Ba and Shu! It will cause public sentiment to turn against us, at which point, We really would be unable to face our late royal father."

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed at the brilliance of it all.

The power of Li Si's argument came from him changing the discussion from economics to military strategy. Although he had focused all of his ammunition on just that single point, he caused listeners to feel as though the entire budget proposal was riddled with holes, and that it did not really take public sentiment into account.

And Xiao Pan definitely would not fail to live up to his reputation as the world-conquering Emperor of the future. Following the opening which had been given, he used the excuse of the Zhengguo Canal's construction to repudiate Lu

Buwei's plan to increase taxes. After he spoke in such a way, aside from a limited number of people such as Lu Buwei, none of the officials present dared to object any further.

Lu Buwei still hadn't had a chance to speak. Li Si continued, "With regards to the three eastern provinces, although a tax cut is proposed, that will not be enough to satisfy the populace. In this humble official's opinion, it would be better if we lightened the local laws and punishments. Right now, Great Qin doesn't suffer from a lack of punishments, it suffers from punishments being too heavy. A person who steals a single coin is punished severely, and anyone who doesn't report the crime suffers the same penalty. The crime is light, but the punishment is heavy. Why must the punishment be so heavy? In places like Ba, Shu, and the newly conquered provinces, imposing such harsh punishments will only cause the people's hearts to harden against us. This will be greatly disadvantageous to our plan of unifying the world."

This discussion had already ranged far astray from Lu Buwei's budget recommendation, but it was firmly on track regarding the question of unifying the world. This clearly came from Li Si's long pondering and was not something which Lu's clique could match.

A ferocious, ugly light flickered in Lu Buwei's eyes repeatedly. Just as he was at a loss as to what to do, Li Si continued to speak. "In a rich nation's strategy, no matter how many transformations and changes there are, none of them should change the original goal. All strategies should

be aimed towards that goal. Places like Ba and Shu have much land but few people. But if we were to sway the people's hearts and promote commerce or subsidize farming, there is a great chance that those two places will flourish. Only then would Great Qin be able to use its resources in our aim to unify the world, without destroying the resource in the process."

Xiao Pan was ecstatic over what he heard. Slapping his table, he expressed his admiration. "Li Si's words are extremely correct. Do my other ministers have anything else to say?"

Lu Buwei and the others were caught totally unprepared. Staring at each other, they did not know what to say, as no one had expected this. Lao Ai left his seat and knelt down, respectfully saying, "Lord Li's wisdom can be considered to be greater than that of Lord Shang Yang himself. This humble official audaciously dares to request the Crown Prince to make an exception and, with the Premier Mentor's concurrence, restart the budgeting proposal process with Li Si at the head. Crown Prince, please consider my suggestion."

As soon as he finished speaking, the entire palace was filled with an uproar.

Only Xiang Shaolong understood that Lao Ai was helping them now out of a desire to avenge the three arrows which Lu Buwei had shot at him last night.

Lu Buwei's fierce eyes flashed with angry light as he glared at Lao Ai, wanting to do nothing but rip Lao Ai apart with his

teeth and swallow him.

Only now did Wang Wen and the others come to realize the normally low-key Li Si's brilliant, awe-inspiring tactics.

This was the first time since he arrived in Qin that Li Si had lifted his head up and spoken forcefully, exposing his unusual spirit, showing exactly how he would, in the future, guarantee himself a political influence which couldn't be diminished.

How could Xiao Pan not understand the opportunity? He immediately asked Zhu Ji for her advice.

Although Zhu Ji felt that it was greatly inappropriate to openly whittle away Lu Buwei's authority in such a manner, she couldn't not support Lao Ai. Nodding, she said, "Royal son, do as you see fit."

Feeling extremely gratified, Xiao Pan happily said, "Li Si, immediately begin carrying this task out. After doing so, prepare two copies, one for Ourselves, one for the Premier Mentor. We will confer with the Premier Mentor first before discussing this in audience."

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised this decision. Although Xiao Pan was clearly diminishing Lu Buwei's influence and authority, he was also giving Lu Buwei a face-saving retreat.

At this point, everyone's gaze fell upon Lu Buwei as they wondered whether or not he would accept this.

Lu Buwei clearly knew himself to have been bested in oral arguments, as he couldn't come up with anything to refute Li

Si's points. But he still remained a wily old fox, and he actually laughed freely. "Lord Senior Historian, you absolutely live up to the Premier Mentor's expectations. You have accomplished a great deed in the service of Great Qin, and should therefore be rewarded. Why don't you come to my residence, where I will put you in charge of handling taxes and revenues, and thus allow you to do all that you are capable of doing."

Smiling, Xiao Pan said, "The Premier Mentor's words are very correct. But We have, for quite some time, had another position in mind for the Senior Historian. During the Spring Sacrifices, I will make it public."

Then, he said in a loud and clear voice, "Today, we'll stop here for now. All other affairs shall be tabled until tomorrow. Court dismissed!"

Xiang Shaolong, waking up, only now realized that noon, the time of his duel with Qiu Risheng, had long passed.

This day at court had been unusually exciting and unusually long-winded. It had lasted for nearly five full sichen, or approximately ten full hours.



## CHAPTER 7

## Experts Converge

[Translated by REN WO XING]

XIAO PAN had just won a beautiful victory and was in high spirits. He invited his closest officials to join him for lunch, and aside from Huan Yi, who had to leave Xianyang early and was unable to participate, even Teng Yi and Jing Jun, who had been miserably waiting outside the palace for Xiang Shaolong to join them and cause trouble at the martial arts school, were invited.

Wang He, Wang Ling, Lords Changping and Changwen, Li Si, and the others were naturally the guests of honor.

The lunch banquet was hosted at the inner halls of the imperial palace. Without Zhu Ji present, Xiao Pan could act as he wished, and was extremely happy.

After the servants finished pouring the wine and bringing the dishes, he immediately shooed them out, so that everyone present could speak freely.

After Xiao Pan and the guests whole-heartedly congratulated Li Si, it fell to Xiang Shaolong to clearly and in great detail discuss the events of the previous night.

When he heard about the games which Lu Buwei was playing, Wang He suddenly grew furious. "It sounds as though the accusations which the departed Lu Gong and Xu Xian made regarding Lu Buwei's involvement in the death of the late King were not baseless after all. He now wants to return to his old tricks. Why don't we gain the initiative by launching a preemptive strike and kill that traitor, Lu, and wipe out all of his traitorous supporters. Crown Prince, please permit me to do so!"

Xiao Pan let out a sigh. "If this matter could be handled so easily, We would have long since summoned him to the palace and executed him. But right now, Lu Buwei's supporters are strong and numerous, and the likes of Du Bi and Pu Hu are waiting on the sidelines, eyes gleaming like hungry tigers. If chaos were to befall the city, Du Bi and the others would collude with outsiders to cause trouble. The three eastern provinces would immediately become difficult to keep. The most dangerous person of all is Meng Ao. So

long as he maintains his military command, it will be difficult for us to act rashly."

Wang Ling, ever steady and reliable, concurred. "At this point in time, the best strategy is to wait for the Black Dragon's appearance, while supporting Lao Ai against Lu Buwei. The tactic of 'painting a picture with two brushes at once' is the best strategy."

As he spoke, he saw Li Si frantically winking at him. Only then did he realize his mistake, and his face turned as gray as ash.

Wang He, naturally, said with astonishment, "What do you mean, the Black Dragon's appearance?"

Xiao Pan had previously issued a stern command, that no one was to divulge the Black Dragon's existence. Now, as Wang Ling realized that he had exposed the secret, he was so terrified that his face turned pale.

Xiao Pan laughed, "Minister Wang, don't be too worried. But I'll only give you this free pass once."

Wang Ling sighed in relief, immediately kneeling down and apologizing for his mistake.

Seeing Xiao Pan's authority increase day by day, Xiang Shaolong was both frightened and exhilarated. Even he himself could not clearly describe what he was feeling.

Xiao Pan personally explained to Wang He about this matter. Overjoyed, Wang He praised Xiang Shaolong, "Only Shaolong could come up with such a brilliant plan that is both exacting

and actionable. Using Lao Ai to counter Lu Buwei is even more unspeakably brilliant. Just now was proof of this approach's brilliance. In the future, no matter how great Lao Ai's influence becomes, in the end a castrated dog remains a castrated dog. Unlike Lu Buwei, he cannot win the hearts of others. Even if he grows two additional heads and sprouts two more sets of arms, he won't be able to escape this old general's hands."

Wang He was the general who, aside from Meng Ao, controlled the greatest amount of power. Naturally, he didn't hold Lao Ai in high regard.

Lu Buwei's power came from the fact that he had strong influence in both the civil side and the military side. Without a suitably complete plan to dispose of him at the proper time, things would become extremely chaotic. And when it comes right down to it, Lao Ai is nothing more than Zhu Ji's boytoy. Getting rid of him wouldn't result in any real repercussions, there would just be a period of struggle and turmoil. Especially now that Xiao Pan had assigned Mao Jiao to spy on him, what damage could he possibly do? Lord Changping coldly snorted, "Qiu Risheng is the real root of the problem. Shaolong, you are free this afternoon anyhow. Although you've promised Lao Ai not to kill him, it'll be easy for you to diminish his prestige."

Up till now, Xiang Shaolong still didn't understand the importance of the martial arts school, and so he seized the chance to ask.

Wang Ling replied, "The turbulence this school is causing was invited into Xianyang by Lord Yangquan from the country of Chu. They specialize in swordsmanship, and they serve in the employ of high officials and ministers. For warriors, they serve as a shortcut for gaining riches and glory, and thus they are flourishing quite well. There are many ministers and officials who have sent their children to the school to learn. Shaolong, in your battle with Qiu Risheng, you must be careful. For him to sit so securely as the headmaster of a school with so many different swordsmen is no mean feat, and requires real skill."

Everyone agreed, raising their glasses and drinking merrily. Their conversation turned towards the subject of the Three Legendary Courtesans. Chatting and laughing, by the time they finished the meal, Xiang Shaolong was totally full. How could he possibly be bothered to go hunt down Qiu Risheng and start punching and kicking him, without even being allowed to kill him? Happy and satisfied, he returned to his government office.

When Xiang Shaolong entered the room, he saw Lao Si there. Teng Yi was in the process of unhappily yet politely listening to him talk. When he saw Xiang Shaolong, he hurriedly disappeared.

When Lao Si saw Xiang Shaolong, he said in a fawning manner, "This humble one comes at the request of his elder brother, who asked me to invite the Great General to the Inner Custodian's Residence to enjoy a dinner banquet together."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly crying out for his mother. Could it be he would have to face Lao Ai for another goddamn night? He immediately wracked his brains, trying to find an excuse to decline.

Lao Si crept closer, putting on a mysterious air. "Tonight, my elder brother invited the Lady of the Three Perfections, Shi Sufang, to go to his manor for drinks. Naturally, he couldn't exclude you, Great General, from the gathering!"

Xiang Shaolong's mind immediately went blank, as a confused buzzing sound filled his mind. No matter how much he might want to deny it, he was moved.

There aren't many men in the world who would be able to resist the allure of rarely seen women of unparalleled beauty such as Shi Sufang or the "Soft Boned Beauty", Lan Gongyuan, even if they were in the position of enemies. Xiang Shaolong was no different.

Naturally, Lao Ai wouldn't be so generous as to allow Xiang Shaolong the chance to become intimate with Shi Sufang. There must have been some sort of condition which Shi Sufang had attached, such as his presence being necessary for her to be present as well. When he came to realize this, he couldn't help but feel immensely proud of himself.

The only issue was that he had just spent the previous night dawdling around at the Drunken Wind Pavilion. If he were to go visit Shi Sufang tonight, what would his tender wives think?

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. "I thank your brother for his

kind intentions, but I do not have the good fortune to attend. Tonight, I must stay at home to accompany my wives. Please inform your brother that I, Xiang Shaolong, consider him to be an excellent friend indeed!"

A small smile on his face, Lao Si appeared extremely disappointed. Clearly, Xiang Shaolong's guess wasn't far off the mark.

After failing in his mission, Lao Si could do nothing besides leave.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a strong sense of longing for his tender wives and beloved son, and so hurriedly returned home.

Ji Yanran returned home at about the same time that he reached the Wu residence. She had just returned from the river, where they had performed a drill on the 'appearance' of the Black Dragon in two days time.

The Tian sisters happily bathed them and changed their clothes. Their gentle, charming care was difficult to describe.

By the time he began to luxuriate in the light of the setting sun with his beloved wives and son in their garden, Xiang Shaolong had long since forgotten all about the matter of Shi Sufang, casting it beyond the highest heavens.

Perhaps he was getting old, or perhaps he had suffered too many deadly, life-and-death setbacks. Right now, he desired nothing more than the feeling of being together with his family and enjoying life with them.

As he engaged in idle family gossip with his three beloved wives, Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, and Wu Tingfang, as he watched Tian Zhen and Tian Feng play with Xiang Bao'er, who had just learned to walk, he felt a sense of joy which could not be replaced by anything whatsoever.

Wu Tingfang, having perhaps heard the news from the Guardians, knew that there had been a dispute in the morning court session and began to ask questions.

Naturally, Xiang Shaolong wouldn't hold anything back from them. He described everything which happened that morning in court, and even told them how he had declined the opportunity to feast with Shi Sufang tonight.

Surprised, Wu Tingfang said, "Beloved Xiang, aren't you afraid of offending Lao Ai as well as that beautiful woman whom every man wishes to get close to? After having witnessed the Soft Boned Beauty, Lan Gongyuan's good looks, I too would like to witness the artistry and skill of Shi Sufang."

Xiang Shaolong was sitting in the courtyard with his three wives. Every so often, the laughter of Xiang Bao'er and the Tian sisters would drift into the courtyard from the soft grassy terrain of the garden. His heart was filled with bliss and contentment, and he said whole-heartedly, "As long as a single one of my three worthy wives are willing to be with me, I, Xiang Shaolong, am wholly contented. Heaven is so kind as to allow me, such a trifle of a man, to have three celestial maidens from heaven as my wives. How would I,



Xiang Shaolong, dare to ask for anything more?"

All three tender wives trembled lightly, their beautiful gazes flashing brightly with a loving flame.

Zhao Zhi, her heart enchanted and her soul intoxicated, said, "A husband such as this, what more can one ask? Every day I am with beloved Xiang feels like the first day we fell in love. Ah! I am so happy, I don't know what to say."

Ji Yanran sighed, "A pity that sister Qing has left for the prefecture of Shu. If she were here, this moment would be even more perfect and flawless. I really wish that milord husband would never have to go off to war again. The taste of parting is really indescribably bitter."

In accordance with Qin military law, when an army is mobilized, no soldier is allowed to bring his spouse or family. And thus, marching off to war is what wives fear the most.

Thinking about the cruelty of war, Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but let out a sigh.

Wu Tingfang moved closer to him. Seating herself within his embrace, she circled her arms around his neck. "Beloved Xiang, you didn't keep your appointment today. Qiu Risheng is sure to brag and claim that you are afraid of him!"

Ji Yanran also sidled over. Leaning against his tiger-like back, she said softly, "Anyone who has seen our Great General's "Hundred Battle Sabreplay" knows that Qiu Risheng just had a stroke of unbelievably good luck. Hmph! I, Ji Yanran, already showed mercy to Guo Xing, but these people still

don't know what's good for them. When milord husband goes to the martial arts school, Yanran will go as well!" Invigorated, Xiang Shaolong boldly said, "Then after tomorrow's morning court, why don't we go to their school to settle accounts!"

Just as Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi were both exclaiming in approval, Ji Yanran let out a cry of dismay. "It has to be later! The Crown Prince asked me to go to the imperial palace tomorrow for his reading lessons. Alas! Since sister Qing isn't here, I have to be her replacement. I hear that sister Qing is very strict with the Crown Prince, but I cannot! It's far too much work for me to scrunch and stiffen up my face like that."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong discover that Ji Yanran had been given the title of Grand Tutor.

At the same time, he felt very touched.

Although Xiao Pan never expressed it, in reality, the longing he felt for his departed mother, Lady Ni, was a source of deeply engraved pain in his heart. He needed a replacement for her, and first, the replacement was Zhu Ji. Then, it was Qin Qing.

Now, it was Ji Yanran.

Otherwise, based on his current intelligence, how could he possibly need others to give him reading lessons?

Wu Tingfang kissed Xiang Shaolong on the side of his face with her soft, fragrant red lips. She gently kissed all across

his face, making him feel indescribably comfortable as he listened to his beautiful, tender young wife say, "Husband Xiang, did you know that Sister Qing owns a very large business in Ba and Shu? Sister Qing is extremely competent when it comes to business."

Xiang Shaolong knew nothing at all about Qin Qing and her history or background, all he knew was that she came from the royal family. Surprised, he pursued this line of question.

Ji Yanran knew more about this than anyone else, so she explained. "Sister Qing originally came from a major clan in Ba, which owned a major cinnabar mine. Cinnabar can be used for medicinal or chemical purposes. Their wealth accumulated over the centuries. By Sister Qing's generation, the Qin family has become the richest family in the Ba prefecture. Hoping to foster cordial relations with their family, the Qin royal family had one of their royal scions propose marriage to Sister Qing. Unexpectedly, right after their wedding rites were completed, her husband was sent on a military mission and died in foreign lands. In order to avoid getting entangled with other nobles, Sister Qing returned to Ba prefecture to focus on the family business. She did resoundingly well, and when the Crown Prince returned to Qin, Lady Huayang recommended her to return to Xianyang and become the Grand Tutor for the Crown Prince. And then, she met you, you affectionate lover, who entangled her in the web of love once more."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why Qin Qing's personal status and stature was so unusually high. It wasn't

due solely to Lady Huayang and Xiao Pan's affection towards her; it was also because she had the powerful backing of a mighty clan in the Ba and Shu prefectures.

It was just as Li Si had stated. When dealing with exceptionally large and powerful prefectures such as Ba and Shu, the only acceptable policy was one of conciliation.

At the same time, he began to understand why she had been so close with Lady Huayang, this noblewoman who had come from the kingdom of Chu. Ba and Shu were, after all, located next to the borders of Chu. A rich and powerful family such as the Qin family would naturally have thousands of connections with the Chu royal family.

Whoever married Qin Qing would not only obtain this beauty of a hundred charms and a thousand fascinations; he would also gain access to her enormous family fortune. Who wouldn't grow red-eyed with desire at this prospect? This was why Qin Qing didn't dare to be with him openly.

Although Qin Qing became a royal kinswoman via her marriage to the royal family here in Xianyang, her marriage was nonetheless a matter filled with political implications.

Just as his thoughts were flying about, Wu Guang came to report that Guo Xing had come looking for him.

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. Leaving the pavilion, he first lifted up Xiang Bao'er and kissed him on his face, before handing him to Tian Zhen as he went to the main hall to meet Guo Xing.

Guo Xing was drinking tea. Upon seeing him, he actually knelt down and kowtowed thrice, frightening Xiang Shaolong so badly that he hurriedly lifted the man up. "Mr. Guo, you honor me far too much!"

After the two sat down, Guo Xing smiled uncomfortably. "This lower official originally came with evil intentions to meet you on this trip."

Xiang Shaolong knew very well that Guo Xing had the desire to capitulate to him. But by now, he had learned to not easily trust others. Smiling, he said, "Assistant Commander, have you come to cause misfortune upon me, on Headmaster Qiu's orders?"

Guo Xing was clearly in the midst of a spat with Qiu Risheng. Coldly snorting, he said, "On what basis would he dare to cause misfortune to you, lord? Today, because milord was busy with morning court and did not show up, he put on an appearance of being disappointed, but everyone could tell that he was relieved of a heavy load. He even took the opportunity to go boar-hunting with Pu Hu. We all knew that it was because he was afraid that Lord Xiang would go a'knocking on his door. After viewing the prowess of Lord Xiang's "Hundred Battles Sabreplay", who would have the courage to dare and try to stroke Lord Xiang's tiger-whiskers?"

Surprised, Xiang Shaolong said, "Then why would he instigate you to come see me?"

Embarrassed, Guo Xing said, "To tell the absolute truth, we

all used to work for the second prince, and the school's expenditures continue to be paid for by Pu Hu. Were it not for him, with Lord Yangquan's demise, we would have had to shut down long ago. But superficially, we must appear to be subordinate to the Lord Inner Custodian. Lu Buwei has tried to seize control over the school several times, but each time, the Lord Inner Custodian has used all his strength to resist."

Sighing, he continued, "Lu Buwei is very crafty. He enticed many of our warriors to his side, then hinted both openly and obliquely that the court wouldn't make use of any of the people we have trained. He wore us out and caused us to suffer shortages of funds. It wasn't until the Lord Inner Custodian aided us that we were able to stabilize our footing and have a short reprieve."

Xiang Shaolong knew that he wasn't too sure of the relationship between himself and Lao Ai, and thus spoke of Lao Ai in a cautious, respectful manner.

Naturally, he wouldn't reveal the real situation to Guo Xing. Nodding, he said, "Brother Guo, what are your future plans?"

Guo Xing once more fell to his knees, calling out, "In the past, Guo Xing did many unforgivable deeds against Lord Xiang, and also used shameful, despicable means to injure Lord Jing. I deserve a thousand deaths. I only hope that in the future, I can atone for my misdeeds by performing meritoriously and be allowed to wholeheartedly serve Lord Xiang. If so, I will be able to die without any regrets."

After having been taught a lesson by Wu Fu, Xiang Shaolong would never again fully trust someone just because of a few words. First, he lifted Guo Xing up, before saying, "Brother Guo, please feel free to speak your mind, and don't do anything like that again."

Guo Xing excitedly said, "Ever since that day when Talented Lady Ji showed me mercy, I, Guo Xing, have been thinking about this. Right now, everyone in Xianyang knows that Lord Xiang's sense of righteousness reaches the heavens, and is extremely considerate to his men. Lord Xiang, please allow this humble one to follow you!"

Forcing out a smile, Xiang Shaolong said, "Is my reputation really that good?"

Guo Xing said, "Lord Xiang, you had two chances to become Premier, but easily gave those chances up. You promoted Li Si, Huan Yi, and Lord Changping, and showed great benevolence to those followers who came with you from Handan. You righteously rescued Prince Dan of Yan. Your good deeds are too many to enumerate. We've been quite aware of all these things this entire time. But because my personal desires and greed had closed my eyes, I only truly awakened after the Talented Lady Ji's spear thrusts. I only hope to be able to follow Lord Xiang and no longer need to worry about fighting and fawning for favor from others, and what's worse, worry that tomorrow, that person will sell me out."

After Xiang Shaolong seriously contemplated his words, he

noded. "Fine! I'll do as you wish, but you had best remember that I'm not an easy man to deceive. If I feel that a single word passes from your lips which are insincere, I will immediately kill you without any hesitation."

Overjoyed, Guo Xing once again knelt on the floor.

Xiang Shaolong had him lift his head up and ordered him to sit down again. "Earlier, it seemed as though there was something you wished to say to me. What is it?"

Guo Xing's expression became solemn, and he said in a lowered voice, "What I'm about to tell you is the result of my own observations and guesses, because I'm not qualified to join the secret meetings held by the Headmaster, Du Bi, and Pu Hu. But due to the many tasks they have assigned to us, I was able to guess a large part of it."

Xiang Shaolong was a person who had experienced many calamities. Quite calmly, he said, "Speak!"

Guo Xing said, "I believe they have made a complete set of plans for the second prince to take over the Crown Prince's position. The critical point is the three eastern prefectures. Although Pu Hu is a native Qin, he has always been zig-zagging between Qin and Zhao. When we consider how wealthy and powerful his family, and the fact that he is linked to both the Qin and the Zhao royal families by intermarriages, he has deep-rooted influences in both countries. If it weren't for his support, the second prince would definitely not be able to thrive as he has."

Xiang Shaolong came to a sudden realization.



Just like how Xiao Pan was the unique resource of Lu Buwei, Cheng Qiao was the unique resource of Pu Hu, the leader of yet another wealthy merchant family.

In previous years, no one could have imagined that Xiao Pan would return and forcibly seize the position of Crown Prince. This is why Pu Hu, Du Bi, and Lord Yangquan had constant fawned upon Madame Xiuli and Cheng Qiao.

Who would have thought that Xiao Pan would successfully escape Zhao and return to Qin, immediately shattering their beautiful dreams.

At first, perhaps they continued to hold Lu Buwei, this rich merchant, in contempt. Only after Lu Buwei had caused Lord Yangquan's death did they know that the situation had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. But they had no place to turn. Their only avenue of escape was to retake the imperial seat.

If Xiao Pan's court was as stable as Mt. Tai, it would naturally be very hard for them to succeed. But fortunately, the court was splint into the Crown Prince faction, the Lu faction, and the Lao Ai faction, three centers of power. Thus, Pu Hu and the others were in a position to cause trouble.

Guo Xing continued, "Pu Hu's most dangerous tactic is his collusion with Zhao's Great General Pang Nuan, who is arrogant in his power. Although I don't know the particulars, from the way the Headmaster speaks, Pang Nuan is in the process of secretly coordinating with the three eastern prefectures, the country of Chu, and the country of Yan to disrupt Lu Buwei and Tian Dan's secret treaties, while

simultaneously assisting the second prince in ascending to the imperial throne. We can imagine how important it is for Du Bi to cause an upheaval in Xianyang. If Lu Buwei made any sudden moves, it would be even better, as that would definitely cause Qin's military force to splinter into multiple factions. At that time, he would openly raise the banner of the second prince with the Zhao army's assistance. His power would be greatly different than it is now."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly proud of himself. His musings from long ago were quite similar to that of Guo Xing's. The only thing he hadn't thought of was the possibility that Pang Nuan would once again try to build a coalition of Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei, and Han.

At the same time, he felt a little wounded at heart. Although Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, and Crown Prince Dan all professed to be as close as brothers to him, in this situation, where kingdoms faced off against each other, not the slightest bit of decision-making being affected by personal relationships could be tolerated.

Reality is always cruel.

Guo Xing said in a low voice, "To cause upheaval, the best thing to do is to assassinate you, Lord Xiang. Everyone would put the blame on Lu Buwei's head. You can imagine what the results would be."

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "There's definitely quite a few people who want to kill me!"

Guo Xing solemnly admonished, "Lord Xiang, please don't

take the threat too lightly. Pu Hu and Pang Nuan have prepared for quite a long time now. They have recruited a gang of strange warriors and have also trained warriors in all of Zhao's assassination techniques. They have been smuggling these people into Xianyang in groups. I personally escorted three of them in. There are all first-class experts. One of them is known as the 'Barefoot Immortal', Kou Lie. He is the most extraordinary expert which Chu has produced in over twenty years. Just from the way he puts on his shoes, one can tell that he is determined to assassinate you, Lord Xiang, even if it costs him his life in the process."

Xiang Shaolong felt a cold shudder pass through him. How could one enjoy life if, every day, he had to worry about a suicidal assassin being after him? He asked, "Does Pu Hu's dancing troupe also have assassins hidden within?"

Guo Xing said, "There should be. But my knowledge is limited, and I cannot say for sure."

Xiang Shaolong said, "The three people you escorted, do you maintain contact with them?"

At the same time, he felt that for Chu to send an assassin to come here to slay him, they must have obtained Li Yuan's permission. Could that mean that Li Yuan also wished to kill him? His heart became ill-at-ease, and he didn't dare to follow that line of thought any further.

But he couldn't help but begin guessing again. It wasn't a big deal if Li Yuan were to want to kill him. But if Lord Longyang were also to desire his death, it would be very difficult for

him to accept that.

Or perhaps these actions were the individual actions of individual swordsmen!

Guo Xing replied, "After I brought them within the city, they went their own ways."

After pausing, he said, "Several unfamiliar faces appeared at our school as well. They follow the Headmaster all day long. They seem to be experts who are hiding their real identities."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed to himself that this was an example of "Another wave arising, before the first had calmed."

Right now, Qin had become the public enemy of all of the eastern kingdoms. Since they couldn't win on the battlefield, their only option was to incite internal unrest. This was the same way modern history operated as well. There were no differences.

Guo Xing said, "Today, I came at Headmaster Qiu's orders to arrange another appointment for the duel. However, it is for fifteen days in the future. I think that he expects that his death-squads will be able to assassinate you before then."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Then go tell him that it will depend on what sort of mood I'm in. Hah! Aren't you worried that they will get suspicious due to you having stayed here this long?"

Guo Xing laughed. "I'll just tell them that Lord Xiang was putting on airs and made me wait here for an hour! After I

go back, I'll find out what I can about the assassins, then think of a way to give the information to you."

Xiang Shaolong clapped him on his shoulders. "Isn't notifying me a very easy thing? Come report in as my assistant, quickly! You are, after all, my assistant commander."

The two laughed loudly at each other. Only then did Guo Xing joyfully depart.

Returning to the inner courtyard, he explained the situation to his three tender wives, telling them to be careful when they went outside. Ji Yanran said, "Their target isn't actually you. It's the Crown Prince. Claiming to be attempting to assassinate you is nothing more than a smokescreen for the general public!"

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly, violently shocked awake. "I'm such an idiot. If they were to kill the Crown Prince, they would immediately cause real unrest, and Cheng Qiao would be able to openly, honorably take the throne as his successor."

To be honest, he actually became more relieved, because if Xiao Pan were to die, then Qin Shihuang would disappear from history, and China would probably not arise.

Ji Yanran said, "We must seize the initiative in this matter. The problem is that the City Guards are tightly controlled by Guan Zhongxie. Otherwise, it would be much easier to act."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was pondering his next move, one of his Guardians came to report that Lao Ai had personally

come to visit him.

Just as Xiang Shaolong's face twisted in distaste, Wu Tingfang laughed and said, "If you can't turn him down, then just go through the motions for tonight! All of us have our utmost faith and trust in husband Xiang."

Sighing, Xiang Shaolong went to meet Lao Ai.

## CHAPTER 8

## The Three Legendary Courtesans

[Translated by JEAN]

LAO AI stood in the middle of the hall and with him were Han Jie and four of his personal guards.

Tao Fang was playing host to them and retreated into the inner hall when Xiang Shaolong arrived.

Lao Ai sighed, "Shaolong, how can you not treat me like a friend?"

After Xiang Shaolong greeted Han Jie and the rest, he pulled him aside and whispered, "It's better that I don't touch this

type of beauty. Last night that Boss Jin deliberately hinted in front of both of us that Shi Sufang was interested in me. He's obviously trying to make Brother Lao jealous and put me on the alert. That's why I had to decline tonight's meeting. Does Brother Lao understand my kind intentions?"

Lao Ai was stunned for a moment before he blushed and said, "I didn't think of that point. Hei! At the most Shi Sufang is just a difficult courtesan to get into bed, how can she possibly sow any discord between us. Brother Xiang, do not be overly suspicious."

Xiang Shaolong knew very well that he doesn't mean what he said but he did not expose him. Instead he said quietly, "In my opinion, this is Pu Hu's devious plot. You must not belittle pretty women, for they can bring down a country. Da Ji and Bao Si are examples of a fine specimen who can bring downfall upon a country and sometimes they are even more formidable than an army, and they can be almost impossible to guard against. In my opinion, if I attend the feast at your residence, Shi Sufang will certainly pretend to be attracted to me and at the same time flirt with Brother Lao. If we are not mentally prepared, what do you think will happen?"

Since Lao Ai is pretending to be a man, of course he cannot give up his deception halfway and he stubbornly continued, "Shaolong, do not worry. I, Lao Ai, can be considered one who grew up among flowers and I've met all kinds of women. If she try to entice me, I naturally have my own ways to deal with it. I guarantee that our relationship will not be strained because of her. Ha! Why don't we use her as



a competition, to see who can get his hands on her but without any jealousy involved. This will spoil Pu Hu's plan. If we can win her heart, we can find out instead what secret collusion Pu Hu has."

Xiang Shaolong secretly finds this amusing and knows that Lao Ai is ultimately not a man made for great things for he cannot control his own sexual urges. He chortled and said, "This is the reason why I have to reject Brother Lao's drinking invitation tonight so that Brother Lao can expand all your efforts to get Shi Sufang in your hands."

Lao Ai sighed, "Of course I won't blame Shaolong now. It's just that Shi Sufang openly declared that she will only attend the feast if Shaolong is around. With her temper, won't it be a damper on the occasion if she were to leave?"

Xiang Shaolong said with a straight face, "See! This is exactly Pu Hu's trap waiting for us to be hooked. So what do you want me to do?"

Lao Ai replied with some embarrassment, "I wish even more that Shaolong can make a trip. Let's see what tricks Shi Sufang can come up with. Maybe I can even drug her a little and turn the tables on Pu Hu instead."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing him for being despicable but then he remembered that he too had made an unsuccessful attempt to drug the Empress of Zhao, Han Jing so he dared not curse Lao Ai too much. Because the truth is, Shi Sufang is indeed up to no good. He said, "If it's so easy to get her, she would have been toyed with by many others

already. A woman like her who is in the business will naturally have her ways of handling such matters. If she exposes the plan, it'll be worse instead."

Lao Ai pulled his sleeve and said, "Time is running out, Shaolong come with me quickly!"

Xiang Shaolong was unable to resist his 'warm offers' so had no choice but to follow him.

After they left Wu Residence, the direction they were travelling in was not towards Lao Ai's Department of Interior Affairs. Xiang Shaolong enquired in surprise and Lai Ai replied with a sigh, "When I found out earlier that Shaolong refused to come, I tasked someone to inform Pu Hu and asked him to subtly find out Shi Sufang's intentions. Never did I expect that she would immediately reply that she won't be coming. Hei! So I had no choice but to come and beg for Shaolong's help. Now we're going to Du Bi's General Residence in Xianyang. As to whether Shi Sufang will agree to see us, it's still an uncertainty."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that men are really naturally worthless scamps. The more a beautiful woman acts high and mighty, the more they feel she's a rarity. Lao Ai has always been popular amongst women and now that he has met someone like Shi Sufang who totally disregards him, he's feeling an intolerable itch instead.

The more he interacts with Pu Hu, the more he feels that this person really has formidable tricks.

After all his years of struggles since coming to this ancient

warring period and with the knowledge regarding this period's history he gleaned occasionally from the talented Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong is no longer as ignorant as he once was when he first came to this era.

And because he came from the 21st century, all the more he can look at everything in this era from an objective angle.

The appointment of Overlords in the San Jin and the Reforms of Shangyang can be considered the biggest change of this era right now, with the changes coming fast and furious. Even the 2,000 odd years following this, other than the terrible times China suffered after the Opium War, it's difficult to find another period in history that can be compared to this.

In this period of great changes, the various Dukes of the Spring and Autumn Period first got rid of feudalism and established the Seven Warring States where the Overlord will hold power. Most importantly, the few areas which has started to expand during the end of the Spring and Autumn Period, like the growth in industry and commerce, expansion of cities, intensification of wars, sudden popularity in new knowledge, liberation in thinking has become even more remarkable during this period.

The most influential thing that appeared during this era is the emergence of huge enterprises.

This emerging transnational social class, because of their abundant financial backing, is able to travel far and wide, gaining experience and knowledge and with their huge social

network, their influence on the political arena is incomparable.

The most outstanding one is of course Lu Buwei, collector of rare artifacts and talents. There are others, like his own Grandfather-in-law Master Wu, Guo Zong who made his fortune from the iron smelting business, and Pu Hu, who is now secretly plotting to overthrow Xiao Pan. They are all great businessmen turned politicians who can control the world.

Even Qin Qing, she was able to stay independent while protecting her chastity and gaining the respect and admiration of the Qins because her clan owns a major cinnabar mine and she is of Qin Royalty. Any other ordinary girl, with her beauty, would already have become some rich and powerful man's mistress.

And to handle the competition between war and politics, the scholars and fighters slowly went their own different ways and everything became professionalized.

Wang Yu and Li Si are two very good examples. If their positions were exchanged it's a guarantee that Qin politics will be in turmoil and the Xiongnus will kill their way to Xianyang soon.

The popularity of professionalism swept through the lands and to the soldiers, the soldiers of the Warring States period is no longer like the soldiers of the Spring-Autumn Period, who are just conscripted farmers made to take up arms.

This resulted in the emergence of associations like Weinan's

Warrior Public House, where there are martial artists and military tacticians abound for the employment of Rulers.

Therefore, regardless of external wars or internal conflicts, the level of intensity and complexity is nothing that the past can compare with.

The reason why Xiao Pan is able to unify the 6 states in future is because out his unique background, for he does not have the offensive habits of those heirs who were brought up by women who lived in the palace. That's why he is able to shine and control the world in this great era of constant changes.

But a talent like him is also a rarity in this world, such that after his death, there was no one else who has the ability to suppress the others. That's why the Qin empire ended after the second generation.

While he was deep in thought, they have arrived outside the gates of the General's residence situated at the west of the city.

By now Xiang Shaolong is also craving for another look at Shi Sufang again. The lure of a beauty is indeed extraordinary. Although he knows that she is up to no good, he can't help but want to get close to her.

This is exactly the most formidable part of Pu Hu's plan.

A successful businessman will always know how to guess his buyer's thoughts, and this fact has remained since time memorial.

In the middle of the great hall was a square table and surrounding this square table there were six seats.

Xiang Shaolong prefers such seating arrangements where everyone is seated around one another as it's more conducive and close-knitted for chats.

Du Bi personally invited Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai and Han Jie into the hall while the rest of the guards stayed outside, where they will be welcomed by others.

Du Bi's attitude is extremely warm, a rare change which makes one unable to imagine that his attitude used to be frosty and aloof in the past.

Naturally Xiang Shaolong knows what he's thinking about.

If they are really are able to assassinate Xiao Pan, or successful in shifting the blame to Lu Buwei, then they will try to fight for the support of Xiang Shaolong and his men because by that time Cheng Qiao would have become the legal successor.

By then, Wang Chi, Wang Ling etc will have no choice but to support Cheng Qiao.

As for Lao Ai, firstly he is still of value now and secondly, Du Bi holds no regards for him at all. Like Wang Chi, he does not believe he's capable of doing anything great, so he just flattered him together with the group.

Lao Ai is most concerned about whether Shi Sufang will be attending the feast so he asked, "Miss Shi..."

Du Bi interrupted with a laugh, "Lord Interior Minister do not worry, Master Pu has gone to speak with Miss Shi personally. Hai! A woman's heart is indeed unfathomable. Actually she has a good impression of Lord Interior Minister as well, it's just that she's a little vexed that Master Xiang would stand her up so she was just putting on some airs! Lord Interior Minister please do not be offended."

Now that Lao Ai has regained some dignity, his confidence is slightly restored and he's suddenly more relaxed.

Right at this time Pu Hu returned and from a distance away, made a hand signal to show that all has been arranged. Du Bi hurriedly invited everyone to sit down, leaving the seat between Xiang Shaolong and Lao Ai empty. Obviously that seat is being kept for Shi Sufang.

The pretty maids first served wine and food, followed by beautiful musicians whose music brought life to the gathering. A number of swirling dancers came out, their movements fluid. A pity that Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai and Han Jie were not here for this and thus were not in the mood to enjoy.

After the dance, the dancers and musicians left the hall, leaving only six elegantly dressed beauties to serve wine and all of them were above average in looks.

Other than Lu Buwei, all the other royalty and officials of Xianyang cannot be compared to Du Bi.

Han Jie asked in passing, "What business does Master Pu has in Xianyang?"

Pu Hu laughed, "With Shaolong's father-in-law around, there's no place for me here at all."

Everyone knows that he's joking and Du Bi said with a laugh, "This old friend of mine, when doing business, is as good as Yi Yin and Lu Shang's stratagems in governing a country, Sun Wu and Wu Qi's military tactics and Shang Yang's reforms. One is so impressed that one is rendered speechless."

Pu Hu said humbly, "And you call yourself my old friend, trying to flatter me against your conscience. But when it comes to business, there are three whom I respect the most. The first one is Shaolong's Grandfather-in-law, master Wu. The horses and cattle he raises are so numerous they cannot be counted by per head, but measured by per valley. Secondly is Bai Gui of the state of Wei, who runs the grains and silk-screen industry. In times of famine, it's easier to borrow grains from him than to take loans from some other states. Thirdly is Yi Dun, the salt in his warehouse is enough to last everyone in this world for a few years. As for Lu Buwei? He's still not considered up to par yet."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought "Here it comes!". Pu Hu's formidable point is his subtlety. Words like these which deliberately demean Lu Buwei were uttered beautifully and convincingly.

Han Jie said with a smile, "But Lu Buwei is indeed someone who knows what to invest in. Once he makes a right bet, he will enjoy the fruits endlessly."

Everyone knows what he was referring to and all chortled



loudly.

Ever since Han Jie stood out that night at Lu Buwei's feast, he has been keeping a low profile, as if he's afraid to steal Lao Ai's thunder. But in reality, his wisdom and air is something that Lao Ai cannot be compared with.

Xiang Shaolong asked nonchalantly, "Isn't Master Pu an expert in investment as well?"

Pu Hu replied with a wry smile, "Master Xiang please be gracious, do not pour salt into my wound again. This time I've really lost badly. If I'd known, I would have learnt from Zhong Sunlong from the state of Qi and become a loan shark instead. If I can just employ someone with half the capabilities of Master Xiang to collect the debts, I can guarantee that money will come rolling in. Then I can avoid the danger of meeting a gambling expert like Ling Yue."

This time, even Xiang Shaolong can't help but laugh. The glib tongues of businessmen are really different from others, their expressions are more lively and interesting.

Lao Ai is only concerned about Shi Sufang and asked, "Is Miss Shi not coming?"

Du Bi replied with a smile, "My lord, do not worry. The prettier a woman, the more difficult she is. Even though Miss Shi is staying in my residence, but up until now I've only seen her twice. A meal taken at the same table like what's happening today is the first time for me! And I have the three of you to thank for it!"

Lao Ai, on seeing that a great Qin general like Du Bi is buttering up to him as well, felt privileged and hurriedly held his wine cup up in a toast.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to drink but in fact, not a single drop of wine touched his lips.

Pu Hu exclaimed in surprise, "Does Master Xiang find the wine not to your liking? I can instruct my men to change it to another type of wine."

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "If Master Pu had just been attacked only a few days ago, I'm afraid you'll behave like me as well and control my drinks."

Pu Hu was about to reply when Lao Ai's eyes brightened as he looked straight ahead at the entrance.

Everyone followed his gaze and looked towards the same direction, and including Xiang Shaolong, all of them were instantly dumbfounded.

Shi Sufang, under the accompaniment of two maids, swayed elegantly into the hall.

The more distressing fact is that she looked as if she has just bathed and changed. Her shiny black hair was just bundled up at the top with just a wooden hairpin to secure it. She was without make-up, wearing only a thin, white and short silk top with sleeves so long that it reached the back of her palms, revealing only her slender fingers. On the bottom she was wearing a plain yellow long skirt, so long that it was trailing on the floor. She wore no other adornments but still

looked a hundred thousand times better than any other women who may not look as good as her but dressed in finery and make up.

Everyone can't help but stand up, and can't help but feel ashamed of themselves.

Shi Sufang's expression was aloof as she moved to Xiang and Lao and sat down between them. Only then did everyone else regain their senses and sat down with her.

Lao Ai brushed off the pretty maid who was coming up to serve her and poured the wine for her personally instead. It seems that once lust took over his soul, he has long forgotten the warning that Xiang Shaolong gave him.

Xiang Shaolong could smell the fresh scent on her body after her bath and can't help but remember the intoxicating time when he first met Ji Yanran after her bath. He was suddenly jolted awake and at the same time saw that while Du Bi is equally head over heels, Pu Hu has been secretly keeping a watch on him. His heart turned icy as he realized that he must not underestimate this flamboyant and experienced businessman.

Man's ambition is never satisfied. Lu Buwei excelled in business and became rich and this exactly represents Pu Hu's mindset, which is why he can ignore a beauty in his hands.

Du Bi has always harbored unhealthy thoughts towards Ji Yanran, so naturally he is unable to resist the shocking and exotic charms of Shi Sufang.

Shi Sufang thanked Lao Ai quietly and slowly turned the crystal clear drink. Not only Lao Ai, all the rest felt as if their souls were being eaten.

Lao Ai had been pining for her arrival but once he was seated beside her, his glib tongue is now suddenly tied and he's at a loss for words.

Shi Sufang offered everyone a toast, then turned towards Xiang Shaolong and asked nonchalantly, "Why is Master Xiang suddenly available again?"

Xiang Shaolong was a little startled by her clear gaze and he lifted his cup with a wry smile as he replied, "I do not wish to give a false answer to Miss Shi's questioning so I can only punish myself with a drink. Would Miss please let me off the hook?"

Pu Hu chortled, "If Miss Shi knows that Master Xiang is risking his life to drink this wine, she'll certainly be touched."

After Xiang Shaolong had a hearty drink, he put his cup down only to catch a glimpse of excitement flash past Shi Sufang's eyes before she averted his eyes. She badgered Pu Hu to clarify his earlier words and after Pu Hu's explanation, Shi Sufang said happily, "It was Sufang who was rude, I'll have a drink with Master Xiang then!"

Saying is one thing, doing is another thing. On seeing that Shi Sufang's attentions are now all on Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai jealously tried to make her drink with him.

Du Bi said with a laugh, "Hold it! Our Miss Shi has a rule, at

every feast, she will only drink three cups of wine. Now she has already drunk two, Master Lao must treasure it.”

Lao Ai was even more annoyed but he dared not make himself appear loutish so he can only give a dry laugh as he tried to compliment her on her music instead.

Shi Sufang listened to him, showing neither approval nor disapproval but when Lao Ai's flattery became too exaggerated, she just smiled lightly and it was enough to make this wily old lecher start itching but there was nothing he could do to her.

Han Jie's sword skills may be excellent but in this instant, he is of no help at all.

When Lao Ai started talking about how Shi Sufang's dance and song is so excellent that no one since time memorial can compare with, Shi Sufang guffawed and replied, “Lord Lao's compliments are really too kind. Compared to sages of the past, Sufang's song and dance is just decadent performances, only good enough to help sirs relieve some boredom. The music and dance of past sages are significant to the peace and stability of a country, and has been marked by Confucius as one of the Six Arts. It is not something that a woman like me can be compared with.”

Lao Ai's knowledge in this area is limited and he can only smile along in consternation, unable to continue the conversation further.

In this area, Xiang Shaolong is even more ignorant than Lao Ai and he was secretly surprised, having the slight feeling

that Shi Sufang's certainly is not of simple background.

Shi Sufang asked calmly, "Has anyone heard of this story? After the death of King Wen of Chu, he left behind a beautiful wife. Master Yuan wanted to seduce her but as he had no access to her, he built a guest house next to her imperial abode. Everyday he'll arrange for extraordinary dance performances, hoping to lure her out. One day, she finally came out and Master Yuan thought that his lure had worked."

Once she came to this point, she spoke no further, leaving a cliffhanger behind.

Her speech was fluent and lively, with pauses at all the right moment. Even Xiang Shaolong was engrossed in her story, much less for Lao Ai.

But this beauty has a unique style and extremely prickly, not someone who gets along easily at all. In front of her, it's very easy for one to feel inferior.

Du Bi said with a sigh, "Of course the widow of King Wen was not tempted, I'm afraid Master Yuan has been snubbed."

Du Bi can't help but try to show off a little in the face of a beauty so that he can get into her good books.

The only thing that can be said has been said by Du Bi and there's no chance for Lao Ai to interject or agree.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed. Lao Ai is completely under this beauty's control now and now if she tries to show

attention to him, it will mean that she is only interested in him and that will certainly incur Lao Ai's jealousy, thus spoiling the good 'honeymoon' period he is having with Lao Ai.

Han Jie said with a smile, "Miss, please have mercy on us and tell us the ending of the story!"

A light fog seems to cloud Shi Sufang's bright eyes as she quietly sighed, "A great teacher will surely live in a place surrounded by thorns, a year of suffering will definitely ensue after a great army. In a battle for land, men are killed in the wild. In a battle for cities, men are killed in the city. Behind every famed ruler and general, is the suffering of the people, so how can there be anyone who impresses Sufang."

This time even Du Bi was at a loss for words.

Instead it was Xiang Shaolong who had momentarily forgotten the hidden enmity of all those present who exclaimed in surprise, "Pity on the bones which lie by the River Wuding, were once lovers in the dreams of their young wives<sup>14</sup>. As the saying goes, behind every great success is the sacrifice of thousands. War has always brought honor to only a handful of people. I really did not expect Miss to feel the same way. Hey! Why are all of you looking at me so strangely?"

When he uttered the first two verses, Shi Sufang has already turned to look at him in surprise, even Pu Hu and the rest were taken aback.

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<sup>14</sup> Poem by Chen Tao – *Dreams of the Departed*

Only then did Xiang Shaolong realize that he has spoken too quickly and again plagiarized the famous words of ‘forbearers’.

His understanding of poetry may be limited, but those that he knows are the most popular and most brilliant verses.

Han Jie furrowed his brows, “Pity on the bones which lie by the River Wuding, were once lovers in the dreams of their young wives. These two verses aptly describe the cruelty of war, but I wonder in which state is River Wuding<sup>15</sup> in?”

Xiang Shaolong avoided Shi Shufang’s extremely round and animated eyes as he blushed in reply, “That can be any river, that’s why it’s called Uncertain River.”

Du Bi took a close look at him before he said with a sigh, “No wonder Learned Lady Ji fell for Lord Xiang. Behind every great success is the sacrifice of thousands, but since time memorial, wars have never stopped. It’s either you’ll kill me or I’ll kill you, there’s nothing anyone can do.”

Lao Ai, on seeing that Xiang Shaolong has managed to surprise Shi Sufang, was feeling greatly discouraged and a feeling of jealousy aroused. He changed the topic, “Miss Shi still has not told us who the person who will command your compliance is.”

Shi Sufang slowly took her eyes away from Xiang Shaolong and glanced at Lao Ai before settling her gaze on the pillar on top of the roof before saying forlornly, “There is this

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<sup>15</sup> River Wuding is in Inner Mongolia. Wuding’s literal translation can also mean uncertain.



person in the state of Chu. It was said that the King of Chu is aware of his intelligence and sent some men to employ him as the Premier. He then asked the emissary, 'I heard the King of Chu has a divine turtle which has been dead for more than 3,000 years and the King of Chu kept it in a cloth tube. Would this turtle prefer to be dead and his bones be kept as a treasure? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail around in mud?'. The emissary replied, 'Of course it'd rather be alive and dragging its tail around in mud'. That person then said, 'Go! I want to drag my tail around in mud.'"

All of them looked at one another in bewilderment as they wonder why she is suddenly telling another story now.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking rapidly, wondering which famed forbearer will have such a story where he's so dispassionate about fame and fortune. He can only hate himself for his limited knowledge, as he is only aware of a few Confusianists and Mohists whose name that every one knows. Suddenly a thought went past his head as he slapped the table and exclaimed, "So Miss is most impressed with Zhuang Zhou<sup>16</sup>, who is adept at using metaphors to illustrate his points, no wonder you love telling stories so much."

Only now did the rest of the people think of Zhuang Zhou and instantly looked at Xiang Shaolong in a new light.

Shi Sufang's eyes gleamed excitedly as she looked at him intently in surprise.

This is the difference between the modern and ancient

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<sup>16</sup> Ancient philosopher more commonly known as Zhuang Zi (Master Zhuang)

world.

In this era, bamboo books are manually written so circulation is not widespread and only a handful of people have the privilege of having books. Unlike the 21st century, where people can not only easily obtain any form of publications, there are also electronic books. Compared to this ancient era where knowledge is difficult to come by, the difference is as wide as heaven and earth.

Shi Sufang asked in surprise, "So Lord Xiang has some knowledge of Zhuang Zhou. I've been looking around but have yet to find anyone who has such outstanding views like him. He is the only one who truly understands the meaning of life. Not taking into consideration the difference between life and death, birth and demise, success and failure, right and wrong, praise and blame, breaking away from the bounds of the world, the ties of emotions, regarding oneself as being as one with the universe. There's no more differentiating between 'me' or 'others'."

This time it was Xiang Shaolong and the rest of the group's turn to be amazed. From her understanding of Zhuang Zi, they can now tell how overwhelming is this beauty's intelligence.

Han Jie asked with great respect, "May I be so bold as to ask where Miss is from originally?"

Shi Sufang's eyes revealed endless pain as she said gently, "The citizen of a doomed country, there's no need to mention it further."

Lao Ai, who came with only thoughts of lust, now has all his evil thoughts erased as he was touched to the core.

Shi Sufang suddenly stood up, took two steps back and bowed, "Although I still owe everyone a cup of wine, but I can only make it up to all of you another day. Sufang only wants to go to a quiet place now to mull over some questions. Everyone, please help yourselves."

Pu Hu was about to speak up and ask her to stay but stopped himself, his expressions complex as well.

As Xiang Shaolong gazed at her perfect silhouette, he secretly thought that in terms of intellect and beauty, this lady is comparable with Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, but obviously not as lucky as them.

He made up his mind that no matter what happens, he will no longer contact her because he now has genuine respect for her and cannot bear to hurt her just because they are on opposing camps.

Although she has successfully aroused Lao Ai's jealousy towards him, there is nothing he can do now.

Lao Ai can deal with him whatever way he wants.

## CHAPTER 9

## I Concede

[Translated by JEAN]

EVEN after his return to the Wu Residence, Xiang Shaolong will still randomly think about this strange lady Shi Sufang.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Zhao Da were in discussion with Ji Yanran. Everyone looked somber.

On seeing that her husband is so obedient that he actually came back before the first watch, Ji Yanran smiled and said, "We were just discussing how we can find the assassination organization that was sent to assassinate Lord Zhengchu. It's really too dangerous if we allow them to strike."

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, "The problem is, we cannot publicize this matter. We can only do it secretly, the less people to know about it, the better. Otherwise, Guoxin's identity will be exposed."

Jing Jun gave a cold snort, "I don't trust Guoxin at all."

Ji Yanran pursed her lips into a smile and said, "We won't trust Guoxin easily as well but we have to give him a chance to prove his own words!"

Xiang Shaolong sat down next to Jing Jun and said with a laugh, "This is called abandoning the dark for the light, turning over a new leaf, correcting a mistake. Xiaojun, you have to remember that forgiveness requires even more courage and love than hatred."

Naturally all of them have never heard such a phrase or such logic and they were all stunned.

Ji Yanran asked happily, "My lord husband seems to be in a good mood tonight. Is it because you've gotten Shi Sufang's favor again?"

Xiang Shaolong thought of Shi Sufang. He sighed, "Shi Sufang can only be described as being a rare lady. I think she has absolutely no interest in relationships between men and women at all. What she likes is Zhuang Zhou, she's disdainful about her own singing skills. She has an intense and unique way of looking at things. Lao Ai ended up like a mouse pulling a turtle<sup>17</sup>, not knowing where to begin and getting

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<sup>17</sup> Mouse pulling a turtle – A Chinese idiom, meaning an impossible task

snubbed whereas I kept a respectful distance. End of report, is the talented lady satisfied?"

As soon as he said the phrase 'mouse pulling a turtle', Ji Yanran laughed so hard that she couldn't catch her breath. Jing Jun and the rest were all smiling but by now, they are all used to Xiang Shaolong's endless new and interesting phrases.

Wu Guo sighed, "Who can be more eloquent than Master Xiang? Luckily I have been Master Xiang's follower for a long time and picked up some of his speech. That's how I managed to woo Xiao Weiwei successfully, and did not disappoint Master Jing."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that Jing Jun had been supporting Wu Guo's pursue of Zhou Wei. He turned towards Zhao Da and asked, "Are you and your brothers doing well in Xianyang?"

Zhao Da revealed a look of gratitude as he nodded his head, "We've never had such glorious days before. As soon as we reveal Master Xiang's name, even those from Zhongfu Residence have to give us some measure of respect. Madam Fang also allowed us to choose the pretty girls to start our families. Hai, Lady left us too soon."

Once he spoke of Zhao Ya, his eyes reddened.

Teng Yi was afraid of bringing up Xiang Shaolong's sad past again and changed the topic, "We've decided to transfer a batch of men back to Xianyang, to be in charge of searching for this group of extremely dangerous warriors. We've also

informed Lord Changwen, asking him to report this matter immediately to the Crown Prince. It's the Spring Festival the day after tomorrow, I'm afraid our enemies will make use of the Spring Festival Ceremony to strike when the Crown Prince leaves the Palace. According to custom, the route to River Wei has already been decided and it cannot be changed. If the assassins hide themselves amongst the welcoming crowd along the paths, it'll be very difficult to spot them."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly shuddered as he remembered how many times he had protected politically important persons in the 21st century. He can be considered an expert in anti-terrorism so won't he be able to put to useful practice what he has learnt for this situation? Everyone saw his strange expression and were all looking at him, stunned, under the impression that he had thought of something shocking.

Xiang Shaolong waved his hand offhandedly as he said with excitement, "I'll be in charge of security for the Spring Festival this time. After the morning court session tomorrow, Xiaojun will come with me to survey the route to the Spring Festival Ceremony. Let us have a face to face combat with these elite assassins who are from the various countries, each using our own methods and see who is better."

Everyone looked at him in astonishment as Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, "The most vicious part of Pu Hu's plan, is that if something happens to the Crown Prince while on his way to the Spring Festival Ceremony, Lord Changwen and I will be punishable by death. He's killing multiple birds with

one stone. From what I see, Pu Hu's intellect is definitely on par with Lu Buwei, just that he's a little down on luck. Just like my duel with Guan Zhongxie the last time, he placed his bet on the wrong person!"

He stood up and stretched lazily before adding, "This time they're still down on their luck, because they are facing me, Xiang Shaolong."

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong woke up as usual before the cock crows to practice his swordplay before leaving for the Palace. As he was especially early, he made use of the little extra time to look for Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan may be the most hardworking prince in the history of the Qin family as he listened to Li Si's reports while having breakfast so that he can handle the court discussion later.

On seeing that Xiang Shaolong has arrived, Xiao Pan hurriedly dispensed with ceremony and asked him to take the lower seat as he said with a serious expression, "Pu Hu and Du Bi are indeed audacious, how dare they have ulterior motives towards me. Guoxing was able to redeem his mistake, General please see how he should be rewarded!"

Xiang Shaolong exchanged a look with Li Si, then said with a laugh, "Your subordinate advises Crown Prince to address me as Grand Tutor. If you address me as General, it feels as if I'll be leading an army into battle any time."

In the whole of Qin, Xiang Shaolong is the only person who could speak to Xiao Pan like that.



Xiao Pan chortled, "As soon as I see Grand Tutor, all my worries are gone."

He turned towards Li Si and said, "Li Si, can you let Grand Tutor have a look at the new coin we'll be launching for Black Dragon!"

Li Si happily placed the new coin on Xiang Shaolong's table.

Xiang Shaolong picked it up for a look. It's a round coin with a round hole in the middle, and written on it the words half tael, with an abstract looking dragon shape. It's really a vast difference from the image of money he had in mind.

Li Si returned to his table and said with a sigh, "Learned Lady Ji indeed lives up to her reputation, with her proposal to change the political system. Not only is it practical and feasible, the political and economical reforms are also taken into consideration. The timeline for implementation is also indicated and the stages of implementation are just right such that the people won't feel forced into it. Please tell Learned Lady that Li Si is in total awe."

Xiao Pan obviously thinks very highly of Li Si as he said with a laugh, "Official Li is too humble. Official Li has given a lot of examples in the whole proposal, and has contributed as much merit as Grand Tutor Ji."

Li Si hurriedly knelt down to give his thanks.

Xiao Pan was silent for a moment before asking Xiang Shaolong, "How is grand Tutor planning to deal with the assassins who are coming to Xianyang this time?"

Xiang Shaolong replied easily, "Don't worry, Crown Prince. The only chance those rebels have to strike is to take us by surprise during the ceremony when your Highness is paying homage to the river god. But now that we're aware of this, the whole situation is reversed. I will work closely with Lord Changwen and crush our enemies' devious plot. I guarantee that not only will no harm come to your Highness, we can also make use of this chance to show those who are involved from the 6 countries our prowess."

Xiao Pan looks up upon him like a deity and he exclaimed joyfully, "With Grand Tutor in charge of this matter, there's nothing for me to worry."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "But your Highness must promise to let me have full control of everything tomorrow, otherwise it'll be difficult to execute our marvelous plan."

Xiao Pan chortled, "Then I will be Grand Tutor's subordinate for one day tomorrow and obey all your instructions."

Li Si gave a heartfelt smile as he felt the total trust and sincerity between the two of them.

The morning court session started with no major upheaval but once Lu Buwei brought up his intention to split the position of Salt and Iron Official into two positions, a fierce debate immediately ensued.

Xiang Shaolong listened for a long time and could only barely understand the gist of the matter.

It turns out that before Duke Xiao, almost all the trades in

Qin were monopolized by the government. But in order to handle the production in these trades, the Qin government set up government agencies to take charge of the different industries. One of the most important posts is that of the Salt and Iron Official as it affects both the common people and the military.

But with the expansion of Qin, a few iron producing centers in the east have slowly fallen into the hands of the Qin people. The duties of the Salt and Iron Official are getting heavier day by day and there are also instances of smuggling salt and iron for personal gains. Besides, salt and iron are basically two entirely unrelated products. Therefore Lu Buwei came up with this suggestion.

The main problem with Lu Buwei's suggestion is that he wanted his own people in charge of Qin's economic and military matters, the two most important lifeline of the empire. Therefore Lord Changpin, Li Si and the rest are trying to delay this until the birth of Black Dragon so that they can make use of the opportunity to take these two positions back.

Naturally it's easier to delay than to object and in the end, there was no determined outcome. Xiao Pan gave the orders for this to be future discussed and the morning court session ended.

Xiang Shaolong returned home and Teng Yi and Jing Jun are already waiting for him to scout the route that Xiao Pan will be taking tomorrow morning.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "How's the situation?"

Teng Yi replied, "Guoxing just reported that Wu Guo had accompanied him to visit the various leaders. According to him, there's not much headway regarding the assassins."

Jing Jun added, "I've discussed it with Lord Changwen. He said we can just find some excuse, for example some guard has stolen items from the palace, then we'll seal the city and search each and every household. Ever since Shang Yang's reforms have been put in place, those who do not report crimes are guilty of the same offense so it should be easy to find any suspicious people. But if these people are hiding in some general or senior officials' residences, it'll be more difficult."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "You must not act rashly. We must pretend that we know nothing at all about this and tell Guoxing not to investigate so that we won't put them on their guard."

Teng Yi smiled, "Third Brother seemed very confident about the Crown Prince's safety tomorrow?"

Xiang Shaolong gave a slight smile and summoned Zhao Da. After giving him instructions to inform Lord Wenchang and Guoxing, he left with Teng Yi and Jing Jun.

They left the city of Xianyang and walked towards River Wei on the official road. Along the way, they only saw endless grassland and knolls. They can't help but feel energized as they enjoyed the scenery, almost forgetting the purpose of their trip.

The emerald lake, the luscious green grass with rays reflecting off them is simply enchanting.

Once in a while they will see shepherds with their herds with cows, goats or horses on the grassland and such a scene added a sense of life and energy on the land.

Teng Yi pointed to a small hillock which was overgrown with trees and said, "If someone hides up there with a strong bow, he'll be able to shoot any target travelling on the official road."

Xiang Shaolong was jolted awake from the mesmerizing scenery and he instructed Jing Jun to note down on his scroll all the possible locations that the assassins can make use of.

Although it's noon, but when they travelled through a densely forested segment of the road, the morning fog has yet to disperse. The air is moist and vision is little hazy.

Teng Yi paled as he said, "From the looks of the weather, there will be heavy fog tomorrow. It's extremely to our disadvantage."

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "I don't think it's entirely to our disadvantage. At least we know our enemies will choose the time when the fog is the heaviest when we are going there to strike and not strike on the return journey. Secondly, the heavy fog is even more favorable to the birth of Black Dragon."

Jing Jun said in awe, "Third Brother is obviously very confident."

Xiang Shaolong asked happily, “My two good brothers, have you every heard of the story of ‘Attacking the wrong carriage’?”

Teng and Jing replied concurrently in confusion, “Attacking the wrong carriage?”

Only then did Xiang Shaolong remember that ‘Attacking the wrong carriage’<sup>18</sup> incident happened after Xiao Pan became Emperor Qin, when Zhang Liang and his strongman attacked the wrong carriage with the iron hammer. He hurriedly tried to cover his mistake and said, “That is what will happen tomorrow. As long as the Crown Prince is hiding in another carriage, we can lure our enemies out without worry and annihilate them.”

Teng and Jing both exclaimed the ingenuity of the plan. By then they are no longer in the mood to survey the areas along the route and after making some plans, they went to River Wei to meet up with Ji Yanran, who is in charge of masquerading as Black Dragon, before returning to the city together.

By the time they returned to the Wu Residence, it’s already dusk.

As soon as they stepped into the main door, Tao Fang

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<sup>18</sup> Zhang Liang’s assassination attempt on Emperor Qin during one of his inspection tours. He found a very strong man and forged an extremely heavy hammer for the strongman. During the ambush, Zhang assumed that the most ornately decorated carriage in the middle is Emperor Qin’s carriage and the strongman hurled the hammer at the carriage, killing its occupant. However, it turned out that Emperor Qin was not the person in that carriage.

informed that Wu Fu had just arrived and waiting for him in the East Hall.

Ji Yanran said in half-seriousness, "Someone is here to fish for news but don't follow him to Drunken Breeze Loft. Don't forget that you have not accompanied us for two nights. If you don't get an early rest, let's see where you'll find the energy to deal with those assassins."

Xiang Shaolong snickered, "Even if I have enough energy, I won't waste it on those women. I already have the whole world. Other than my pretty wives, nothing else in this world will be able to tempt me."

Ji Yanran smiled sweetly and let him go.

When he arrived at the East Hall, he saw that Wu Fu was behaving restlessly and secretly thought it amusing. He went up and said, "Master Wu really should not be here, what if it raises the suspicion of Lao Ai and Lu Buwei's men?"

Wu Fu had already prepared his speech as he replied humbly, "Master Xiang, do not worry, I will be extremely careful."

After they sat down, Wu Fu asked quietly, "What was the Crown Prince's reaction after he found out about that matter?"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly amused as he replied calmly, "Of course he was furious, but because of the Empress Dowager, he can only be on his guard secretly until he finds evidence. By then he'll be able to settle scores with Lao Ai

and let's see how the Empress Dowager can protect him then."

He paused and added, "The Crown Prince admires your loyalty very much and was considering how he should reward you."

Wu Fu was ecstatic, "As long as I can be of service to the Crown Prince and Master Xiang, I am satisfied. I'm not concerned about rewards."

Xiang Shaolong said deliberately, "Otherwise we can create an official post for you to enjoy, but someone else will have to take care of your Drunkard Wind Loft because no official can ever open a brothel as a sideline. And it won't look good either if made known. Anyway, you've earned more than enough!"

Wu Fu was thrilled as he replied with a wide grin, "That's a minor problem. Master Pu had always wanted to buy over my Drunkard Wind Loft. If the sale is successful, I will give half of the proceeds to you. I know that such a trivial amount is nothing in Master Xiang's eyes but it represents a little token on my part."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this gift is considered quite substantial.

He suddenly had a thought. This Wu Fu is actually trying to cover all bases so that no matter which side gains the upper hand, he can still enjoy advantages.

Once he had this understanding, he realized that this person



can be made used of.

Especially when the Black Dragon is about to be born tomorrow, it will certainly shock the kingdom, and the rise of one group will mean the decline of the other. Once Xiao Pan's reputation soars, people like Wu Fu who sees where the wind blows should know who they must side with.

Wu Fu furrowed his brow, "If Master Xiang is interested in that lady from my loft, just a word from you and I'll send her over to serve you. Even if it's Meimei, I'll have a way."

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, "You're not afraid of Lu Buwei?"

Wu Fu sighed, "I've no choice even if I'm afraid. Meimei is now using her life to threaten me and she refuses to become Lu Buwei's concubine. Of course, if I have Meimei's beauty, I wouldn't want to marry into Zhongfu Residence as well."

Xiang Shaolong was very surprised. So Dan Meimei is with Lu Buwei because she fear his power and not because she's willing. His hatred for her diminished immediately and a sense of pity rose up instead as he asked, "How is Lu Buwei handling this matter?"

Wu Fu laughed, "What can he do? He can only try to pressure and bribe me but poor me is threatened by Lao Ai as well. I'm sandwiched in the middle and have not had a good night's sleep. Master Xiang, just take a look at me now and you'll know."

Xiang Shaolong took a close look at his face and indeed he

looked haggard with dark circles under his eyes. He said with a smile, "If you knew this would happen, why do it in the first place? Lu Buwei has no feelings at all yet you helped him trick me. Aren't you just looking for trouble?"

Wu Fu was stunned at first, then he paled as he stuttered, "I don't understand what you mean."

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Even Mo Ao couldn't trick me, so how do you think you fare when compared to Mo Ao?"

Wu Fu threw himself to the ground and exclaimed in fear, "Master Xiang have misunderstood me, if I lie..."

Xiang Shaolong interrupted him, "Please don't make any life or death vows, otherwise I may really decide to punish you in Heaven's name just like what you wished for."

Wu Fu cried out, "Please believe me, I really..."

'Swish!' The precious sword that has been through hundreds of battles left its sheath.

Wu Fu was so terrified he scrambled away, cold sweat as large as peas filled his forehead as his face turned deathly pale.

Xiang Shaolong placed the precious sword nonchalantly on the table next to him and said off handedly, "I won't hide it from you. I have spies with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, so I know everything. If you utter one more word of untruth, I will chop off your head with this sword and parade it at the market square. Of course the offense will be deceiving the ruler."

Wu Fu was stunned for a moment before he replied dejectedly, "I concede!"

## CHAPTER 10

## The Dragon rises from River Wei

[Translated by JEAN]

## SPRING FESTIVAL!

Before the sun rose, most of the citizens of Xianyang city have already changed into new clothes, as if it's a market day and headed towards the upstream of River Wei to take part in the grand Spring festivities.

Although the roads were crowded, everything was in an orderly fashion.

Under the orders of Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Guo Yu, 200,000

cavalry were out in full force maintaining order along the way.

All the high posts along the way which can be used for ambush are guarded and security is tight.

If there are assassins, they can only make use of the woods on the sides of the roads as cover in order to execute their assassination attempts.

Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei and a group of higher ranked officials went to the Palace to meet up with Xiao Pan before the sun rose. They first paid their respects to the late King at the ancestral shrine before leaving in carriages.

Under the protection of Lord Changwen and a group of elite imperial guards, Xiao Pan went according to plan and did not travel in the grand imperial carriage. Instead he is dressed as one of the imperial guard and set off undercover with the main team.

Inside the imperial carriage was Jing Shan who was pretending to be Xiao Pan. This person's dexterity is comparable to Jing Jun and is really the best person who can deal with sudden changes.

Xiang Shaolong was still worried that something will happen to him and specially reinforced the walls of the horse carriage with steel plates, just like the bullet-proof vehicles of the 21st century.

The huge entourage left the palace gates and traveled along River Wei once they left the city.

The commoners were cheering along both sides of the road as a show of their support and love towards the ruler.

Each of the two teams has about a hundred odd imperial soldiers with ferocious dogs doing a sweep of the heavily forested areas along both sides of the road to prevent the enemy from hiding in the woods to shoot at them.

The Wu family warriors were disguised as common folk and mixed around in the crowd, almost like plain-clothes spies of the 21st century, keeping a look out for suspicious characters in the crowd.

Xiang Shaolong was riding behind the imperial carriage, constantly giving orders to the imperial guards, putting to total use everything he has learnt in the 21st century.

With the imperial guards opening the way, the imperial carriage moved right ahead. Everywhere they went the crowd hurriedly gave way, kneeling in respect.

On both sides of the team of carriages were two rows of imperial guards. The ones on the outer row held long shields while the ones on the inner row were armed with bows and arrows. In terms of defense, it is indeed extremely watertight.

Xiang Shaolong slowed down to more than 10 horse lengths behind and rode together with Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Wenchang etc.

Xiao Pan looked appreciatively at the horsemen on top of the hills on the left of them who were waving the flags

signifying safety and said, "Grand Tutor's plans are indeed an eye opener for me."

Li Si added with a smile, "Even if the assassin is formidable with 3 heads or 6 arms, in my opinion there is no way he can find a window of opportunity to strike and can only retreat in face of such difficulty."

Xiang Shaolong looked up. Gazing at the heavy morning fog, he said with a smile, "The enemy must have made careful plans and will surely have ways to deal with sudden changes. If my guess is right, the main attack will come from further ahead. If they can get to the top of the trees, they'll be able to attack with weapons such as arrows and stones if we are not prepared. And with the support of the assassins who are working undercover among the crowd and with a clear target, they may be able to succeed after all."

Xiao Pan, Li Si and Lord Wenchang looked at the top of the trees that is covered in fog and can't help but feel a cold shiver in their hearts.

Xiang Shaolong continued, "Right in front there is a forest and it is the most ideal place for both attacking and escaping. If they want to strike, it would be that place."

Xiao Pan was thinking all these exciting as his eyes blazed hotly whereas Li Si and Lord Wenchang started feeling nervous, no longer in the mood to joke.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Emperor Qin is Emperor Qin indeed, for his is braver than most men.

He nudged his horse and went after Wang Yu.

The leading troops led the way on the official road to the forest where the rites will be held.

The fog became thicker and anything more than ten steps away cannot be seen clearly.

The entourage has yet to arrive but the common folk can already hear the music as they hurriedly went down on their knees on both sides of the road and waited for the carriages to drive past.

Amidst the cheers and music, Wang Yu drove into the woods.

The imperial guards have received their instructions earlier and all are on the alert to deal with any sudden events.

Xiang Shaolong was calm instead. His eyes searched out Wu Guo who was in the crowd and exchanged a look with him. He was not surprised if Wu Guo did not find out anything out of the ordinary.

If the enemy doesn't even have a way to disguise themselves, they won't even come.

When a group of experts have made a death wish and decided to assassinate a target, they will become a terrible force to reckon with.

Xiang Shaolong gave out orders to the soldiers surrounding them. Wu Yan and his men spread out a little more, behind Wang Yu. All were on high alert.



The half mile long forest road feels as long as a century.

Much to everyone's surprise, even when they were nearing the edge of the forest and the trees are beginning to thin, there's still no sign of any assassins.

The sound of the River Wei gushing ahead could be heard from up ahead.

Suddenly the road in front opened up and they saw the river gushing. The fog is now just like a thin blanket covering the earth.

Xiang Shaolong was just breathing a sigh of relief when there was a strange and sudden change.

Strange calls were heard from the sides of the road and just as Xiang Shaolong was still wondering what's happening, the imperial guards surrounding the imperial carriage all fell from their horses, followed by the horrible sound of a heavy object crashing towards the carriage at a shocking speed. The driver of the carriage had his head totally severed by some strange, horrible weapon and fell off the carriage. The eight horses which were pulling the carriage all fell in a pool of blood.

The outside walls of the carriage shattered and splintered, the sound shocking.

There was immediate chaos amongst the crowd as everyone tried to escape in all directions. Cries and screams filled the air and it was difficult to differentiate who is the enemy.

Xiang Shaolong roared as he pulled out his precious sword

and charged forward.

A few people jumped out from the sides of the road.

With a 'whoosh', one of them used a heavy metal bar to smash the door open. By now the nearest imperial guard to the imperial carriage who's not yet dead or injured is at least ten steps away.

"Argh!" one of the men who tried to dash up the carriage was struck in front with an arrow and fell to the floor.

All the warriors fired their arrows. The attackers were all shot dead but two of them managed to somersault backwards and slipped into the woods, avoiding the arrows.

Xiang Shaolong and his men went to surround the area.

More than a dozen shadows escaped from two sides, running towards River Wei.

Amidst the sounds of hooves and cries, the guards ran after them.

Xiang Shaolong ran up to the side of the smashed carriage door and shouted, "Calm the masses!" Xiang Shaolong took a look inside the carriage.

Only to see Jing Shan extend his deathly pale face as he stuttered, "Luckily there were the steel slabs. Otherwise I'll be dead."

Xiang Shaolong took a better look, and saw more than a dozen round metal wheels scattered on the ground, their edges thin and sharp as they shone but by now all of them

have a broken edge.

He took another look at the 30 odd imperial guards lying in pools of blood around the carriage, all of whom died instantly. The scene was frightening with broken pieces of armor scattered around the road.

Such circular wheels that were thrown with the hands are even more fatal than bows and arrows, such that even armors are of no protection.

Another look at the walls of the carriage. The wood was splintered, revealing the steel plates that had become warped. He can't help but suck in an icy breath.

Two of the circular wheels managed to fly into the carriage and sliced open Jing Shan's armor when they rebounded. Luckily it was only a minor wound.

The entourage stopped.

The frightened masses were gathered to a corner, far away from the crime scene. Wu Guo was in charge over there to check if there are any assassins hiding amongst the masses.

Xiao Pan and the rest came up to Xiang Shaolong and after seeing the horrible aftermath, they were all fearfully astounded.

By now Lord Changwen's men came to report that the assassins jumped into the river and swam across to the opposite bank. They only managed to kill three of them.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse to check on the

assassins who were killed. All of them were struck by at least three arrows and died on the spot. There're no further clues that are worth pursuing.

Wan Chi, Wang Lin, Lao Ai, Lu Buwei and the other officials hurriedly rushed forward and on seeing Jing Shan walking out from within the carriage, were all dumbfounded.

Xiao Pan removed his helmet and revealed himself. His expression was icy as he ordered Guan Zhongxie, "Search the city immediately. If there are still assassins inside the city, you can say goodbye to your position as Commander of the City Guards."

His gaze fell upon the corpse filled ground and said sadly, "Give them a grand burial and compensation!" He could not bear to witness any more of this and nudged his horse towards the grounds for the Spring rites.

Although a great assassination tragedy has happened, most of the people are not aware of what happened and the atmosphere is still lively.

When Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei and the rest of the officials ascended the platform for the rites, the sound of drums were heard and the tens of thousands of common folk gathered on the bank of the river all knelt down and chorused, "Long live your Majesty."

Teng Yi and Jing Jun gave orders to the Calvary as they were left in charge of maintaining order.

Ever since the reforms of Shangyang, amongst the seven

states of the warring kingdoms, the people of Qin are the most law-abiding and obedient. Even in such a situation, everything is done in an orderly fashion.

Because of what happened earlier, Xiang Shaolong and the rest were worried that there are still assassins hiding among the crowd so they erected a human barrier, segregating everyone a safe distance away.

The fog thickened again, seemingly frozen on the river and refusing to disperse, which lets one feel that nature can be such a mystery.

Xiang Shaolong who was standing below the platform kept an eye on the expressions of Du Bi and Pu Hu, who were standing on the platform. Although they looked normal, they occasionally let slip small movements which betrayed their uneasiness. He knows that they are feeling lost now that the assassination attempt has failed.

Xiao Pan took over the torch and lighted the kindling in the giant cauldron. The fiery flame shot heavenward as the smoke filled the air, into the fog.

The whole place was solemnly silent.

Xiao Pan opened the ritual script and started reading aloud.

He stood erect, with a solemn air and indeed has the regal bearing of a ruler of the world.

At this point in time Teng Yi came up to Xiang Shaolong and said quietly, "I heard that even Xiaoshan almost lost his life. I didn't expect the assassins to be so formidable.

Xiang Shaolong was still shaken as he replied, "If the target is me, even I would not be able to survive. Who would have expected that they would have such frightening weapons."

Teng Yi stared at River Wei, which was covered with a layer of smoke and fog, the opposite bank is now totally indiscernible by now. Teng Yi gave him a nudge and said, "Coming!"

Xiang Shaolong could not see anything at all initially but after his warning, his eyes sought out the surroundings and indeed realized that something seems to be stirring up the river as it bubbled with ferocity.

Those standing near the bank began to realize something strange is happening and they all started pointing in astonishment.

Lu Buwei and the rest, who were on the platform, were all dumbfounded, looking quizzically at the river.

The crowd standing further back all stepped forward to have a closer look.

The voice of Xiao Pan's reading the rites was slowly covered by the shouts of the crowd.

A black, curved dragon's tail emerged about five feet from the water amongst the fog before it smashed back into the water ferociously and water droplets flew up into the air, seemingly clearing the heavy fog.

Xiang and Teng did not expect Ji Yanran to come up with this move. This moving animal, when compared to the 'dead

dragon' used during the rehearsal, is as different as heaven and earth. Everyone was shocked.

The crowd on the banks and the leaders and officials on the platform were all shell-shocked. Cries of wonderment rose up.

There are even some who were so frightened that their legs have turned to jelly and they collapsed to the ground.

The imperial guards were still shaken by what happened earlier and they hurriedly surrounded Xiao Pan, some of them even pulling out their weapons.

Xiao Pan stopped them with a shout, "A mystical creature have emerged from the waters, do not act rashly. Anyone who disobeys will be beheaded."

Of course Lord Changwen and the rest immediately stopped the guards to avoid another 'tragedy' from happening. The river is now calm again.

Tens of thousands of people all held their breath as they stared at the river.

Suddenly there were cries of alarm as deep in the fog, a black dragon head revealed its mystical presence again, creating waves as it bobbed on the water. It took some time before sinking back into the water again.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest shouted in chorus, "The birth of the Black Dragon, Heaven has bestowed a mythical creature upon Great Qin and we have the support of the River God."

Lord Changping took the lead and knelt down first. The rest of the people followed him and knelt as well. Even Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie and the rest were influenced by the air of excitement and knelt down as well.

For about 5 miles along the riverbank, it was filled with people offering their prayers towards the river.

In the end only Xiao Pan remained standing on the platform alone, lifting his hands up in the air as he faced the river, his stance certainly standing out from the crowd.

As the thousands held their breath, the Black Dragon appeared again.

The gigantic dragon head emerged just a few feet away, directly in front of Xiao Pan before sinking down again. This happened three times. The whole dragon rose out of the water, more than a hundred feet long, its tail constantly slapping on the water. Everyone who saw it was terrified.

The black dragon suddenly let rip an earth shattering roar. Although Xiang Shaolong and the rest knows very well that this is the effect of many men shouting at the same time, they can't help but be impressed with the realistic effect.

Fire suddenly shot out of the black dragon's eyes as its head bobbed three times towards Xiao Pan, as if it is bowing to him before going back into the water.

Wang Chi took the opportunity to shout, "A magical creature has blessed our sovereign, long live our Majesty."

The crowd regained their senses as they cried out in unison,



“Long live the Black Dragon, long live our Majesty!” The cheers waved and ebbed like the water on the river, echoing across the valley as thousands of people became excited and the atmosphere became extremely lively.

The black dragon did not appear again. Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, Du Bi, Pu Hu, Lao Ai all looked at one another in astonishment, not knowing how they should consider this strange and frightening event that just happened right in front of their eyes.

Striking while the iron is hot, everyone was celebrating the fact that the black dragon has blessed their king. On Xiao Pan’s way back to the palace, Ji Yanran disguised herself as a messenger and blocked Xiao Pan’s path to offer him Zou Yan’s ‘Complete Book of Five Virtues’.

This dramatic scene of blocking the path to offer a book caused another stir and by now the emotions of the officials and the common people is uncontrollable.

Groups of court officials and generals went to the palace on their own accord to visit Xiao Pan as they pledged their loyalty. Firecrackers can be heard everywhere in Xianyang City.

The people were dancing and singing on the streets as they made their way to the palace to pay their respects.

Taking Xiang Shaolong’s suggestion, Xiao Pan opened up the training grounds in the palace to the public and even came out three times to receive the people’s adulation. Naturally security was extremely tight as well.

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were caught off guard and although they harbored some suspicions, there was nothing they can do.

The appearance of black dragon is ten times more formidable than ten copies of "Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu". Xiao Pan's reputation suddenly soared to the highest point that was previously unheard of.

## CHAPTER 11

## Returning Good For Evil

[Translated by JEAN]

XIANG SHAOLONG had wanted to slip away but he was dragged by the recently promoted and over enthusiastic Li Si to see Xiao Pan. Ji Yanran was not as happy as them and went home on her own.

Although this time it cannot be considered a complete victory, but it's a huge change for the better. Want Chi, Wang Ling, Lords Changping and Changwen were all in high spirits as they surrounded Xiang Shaolong, this great mastermind into the inner court to see Xiao Pan.

On seeing everyone arriving, Xiao Pan walked down from his dragon throne, so touched that his eyes turned red from the emotions.

Xiang Shaolong was a bit confounded as he looked at Xiao Pan striding towards him in an imposing manner.

Suddenly he felt as if Xiao Pan is a total stranger, yet at the same time so close that he's like his own son.

The kind of two extreme reactions clashing together gave him an exceptionally strange feeling.

In another few years, Xiao Pan will be crowned as Emperor.

And his relationship with this future Emperor Qin, will have to come to an end.

He has to leave.

Because he does not wish to be drenched in the blood of the soldiers and civilians of the Six States. He is totally weary towards wars.

Xiao Pan's actual age is 19 years old, and he absolutely has the air and commanding presence of a ruler of the times who feels that he is way above all other living things.

He may be half a head shorter than Xiang Shaolong but his shoulders are broad and his limbs muscular with a squarish face and big ears. The most striking is his eyes, when he glanced over at Xiang Shaolong, even he felt a chill in his heart.

In the past, when Xu Xian and Lord Lu found out that he is

not Lu Buwei's illegitimate son, they immediately pledged loyalty to him. And now Wang Ling and Wang Chi are devoted to him without any reason at all. Xiao Pan is just that kind of natural born political leader who has the charisma to make others submit to him.

One can imagine that when the time comes for him to be officially crowned as Emperor, he will become even more remarkable.

Xiao Pan came to Xiang Shaolong and grabbed his hands tightly as he exclaimed with joy, "Grand Tutor, we've succeeded."

Li Si and the rest surrounded the two of them and shouted out their congratulations. All of them were beginning to sound a little nonsensical.

All along, in the power struggle between a ruler and his power-holding official, the fight is never completed without some form of bloodshed.

But with this Black Dragon, a stroke of genius, they immediately sliced off more than half of Lu Buwei's power which he had painstakingly built up over many years and at the same time, possibly crushed the plans that he had been secretly making. To be able to achieve such an outcome without a single soldier or bloodshed, how can one not feel strangely touching.

With the current situation, it is absolutely impossible for anyone to raise a coup. Even the civilians of Xianyang will rise up to support Xiao Pan, not to mention the military

which has always been loyal to the royal family.

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, "I should take a rest too, will your Majesty please grant me the permission."

Xiao Pan sighed, "Much as I am extremely unwilling to do so, I can only accede to your request. But once anything happens, Grand Tutor must come back to help me."

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a weight has been lifted off him as he said, "In politics there's Lord Changping and Li Tingwei and in military there's the two Supreme Generals. Your Majesty, just do as you deem fit!"

Everyone roared with laughter.

Because Xiang Shaolong is as good as saying, don't come disturbing me if there's nothing wrong.

Li Si chided laughingly, "Lord Xiang please do not make fun of me. With Xiang Shaolong, I will always be the same Li Si you met outside the city initially when you came back from Zhao."

Xiao Pan said, "When does Grand Tutor plan to return to the farm for your temporary leave?"

On hearing his emphasis on the two words 'temporary leave', all of them revealed a knowing smile.

Instead Xiang Shaolong grabbed Xiao Pan's hands tightly, so tight that he could feel their flesh and blood merged together as he answered, "After we eliminate Qiu Risheng's Warrior School and after Xiao Jun's wedding, I'll return to

the farm and take my temporary leave as you wish. I should still be in Xianyang for another ten odd days. Heh, I want to go home for a shower and change in order to get ready for the feast tonight.”

Xiao Pan let go of Xiang Shaolong’s hands unwillingly as he uttered emotionally, “That I, Ying Zheng, will have this day, is all thanks to Grand Tutor.”

That he, as a ruler of the country, is willing to say such a statement, is enough to move everyone.

Only Xiang Shaolong truly understands the hidden meaning he is conveying.

Who would have expected that the mischievous imp of the past who only knows how to harass palace maids will ultimately become the famous Emperor Qin who will unify the world?

Outside the palace doors, it was filled with people trying to take a look at the ruler and when they saw Xiang Shaolong coming out, cheers erupted immediately.

The sounds of hooves were heard. Guoxing, leading a troop rushed out from the side and saluted him from a distance.

On seeing Guoxing wearing his military uniform, like a changed man with his suave demeanor, Xiang Shaolong remembered the way Jing Jun looked when he wore his official uniform for the first time. He can’t help but feel a deeper sense of closeness towards Guoxing.

Guoxing came up to him and accompanied him as he rode

towards the Wu residence. He said with a quiet laugh, "I've been waiting outside for quite some time. Earlier when Lao Ai and Lu Buwei came out separately, the crowds all jeered at them and they were so livid their faces were contorted. But when Great General Xiang emerged, you received the loudest cheers."

Seeing little children in their brand new clothes setting off firecrackers and playing catch at the side, Xiang Shaolong has never felt so relaxed before.

Xiao Pan has finally stabilized his throne and in future, he's the only person who will settle scores with others. People like Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will only be fit to become his sparring practice targets.

Guoxing said, "Master Xiang, please trust me. In future I will follow you with absolute loyalty."

On hearing the change in his behavior, Xiang Shaolong showed his magnanimity by saying, "I will be leaving in about 10 odd days and Xiao Jun will take over my position for the time being. Just follow Xiao Jun and work well with him, this is also the best opportunity for you to mend relations with him."

After Guoxing nodded his head in agreement, he lowered his voice and said, "After 5 of those assassins escaped, they all ran to Du Bi's General Residence to hide from the search. From what I understand from Qiu Risheng, they will masquerade themselves as warriors from our Warrior School and attend the feast tonight.



Xiang Shaolong asked in puzzlement, "Did they think they still have a chance at assassination tonight, or do they not know that all who enter the Palace to attend feasts are not allowed to bring weapons?"

Guoxing replied, "Qiu Risheng is not that careless, he just hopes to make use of those people to regain some prestige of his school."

Xiang Shaolong said nonchalantly, "Fine, then let me see what this Qiu Risheng looks like tonight. If not because of Lao Ai, I would have torn his school down today."

On hearing this, Guoxing was petrified and secretly relieved that he has 'changed his loyalty to the wise ruler', otherwise he would be one of those who would face utter humiliation.

Guoxing added, "I heard that this morning Dan Meimei attempted suicide by hanging herself but luckily she was saved."

By now Xiang Shaolong only feels pity and no hate towards Dan Meimei. But it's really not convenient for him to interfere in this matter so he could only secretly lament that much as he would like to help, his hands are tied.

He can't stop himself from asking, "Is Dan Meimei's heart with Lao Ai?"

Guoxing gave a mysterious reply, "I'm afraid she's the only one who knows. But there has been talk amongst the servants going around Drunken Wind Loft, saying that the person Dan Meimei is really interested in is you, Master

Xiang.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled as he exclaimed hoarsely, “That must be a mistake, otherwise why would I not feel anything at all.”

Guoxing bumped his shoulder as he replied, “A woman’s heart is most unfathomable. Or maybe it’s a wrong rumor!”

By then they have reached the Wu residence and Guoxing left after saluting.

As soon as Xiang Shaolong thought of his own wonderful and warmhearted family, all thoughts of Dan Meimei were cast to the back of his mind immediately.

As soon as he stepped into the house, his men told him that the famous courtesan Yang Yu from Drunken Wind Loft is here to look for him and currently waiting at the East Hall.

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and he could roughly guess that this visit must be related to the unsuccessful suicide attempt by Dan Meimei and can only secretly heave a sigh.

He is almost of the mind to instruct his men to send Yang Yu away but ultimately he could not harden his heart to do it. After a brief internal struggle, he went to the East Hall.

This beauty was devoid of her makeup and wearing a plain outfit, and looks even more pleasing to the eye than when she was all decked up and heavily made up. Although she’s still incomparable to the previous night’s Shi Sufang, but her delicate beauty can still be considered rare.

Up until now he still cannot decipher the inner workings of this lady of the night's heart.

Is she forced to harm him because she had to submit to Lu Buwei's power? Or is she really in love with either Guan Zhongxie or Xu Shang, that's why she's willing to aid them in evil.

In an environment full of schemes and nefarious plots, he has learnt not to trust anyone easily.

At the same time he learnt how to use various methods to deal with his enemies, for example Wu Fu and Guoxing.

Yang Yu saw him arrive and left her seat in joy to receive him.

Xiang Shaolong was really worried that she will throw herself into his arms and if the servants see that, they will report to Wu Tingfang and the other ladies. By then there's no way he will be able to defend himself.

That's the thing with the human psychology. If he goes and have fun at Drunken Wind Loft, Learned Lady Ji and the rest can pretend ignorance as long as they don't witness anything but if he were to bring the playthings home, that's another matter altogether.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly bowed and said politely, "Miss Yu, please take a seat."

Yang Yu is an expert in the psychology of men. She smiled sweetly and after giving him an extremely meaningful look, retreated back to her seat. She waited for Xiang Shaolong to

sit down next to her before she raised her brows and said quietly, "Meimei wanted to hang herself this morning. Luckily we have been on the alert to prevent her from committing silly acts so we were able to save her in time. But now there's a horrible looking scar on her neck, she won't be able to receive guests for quite some time."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Miss Yu has come to see me, is it because you think I can be of assistance to her?"

Yang Yu sighed and said, "I know very well that by coming to see Great General Xiang like this, you are already being very kind to me by not chasing me out of your residence. It's just that Meimei and I are closer than real sisters, the others are afraid of Lu Buwei's authority and are keeping silent. In the whole of Xianyang City now, Great General is the only one who holds no regard for Lu Buwei at all. Meimei and I are really at our wits end so we can only shamelessly come and seek Lord Xiang's help."

Xiang Shaolong asked worriedly, "Wasn't Meimei always on good terms with Lord Lao? Now that his power has increased greatly, if he is willing to marry Meimei and she doesn't mind, it should be very difficult for Lu Buwei to raise objections."

Yang Yu revealed a look of disdain as she said with a snort, "What is Lao Ai, at the very most he is just a toy boy of the Dowager. He can come out and flirt around but a month ago, someone gave him two song courtesans and in the end they were beaten to death by the Dowager's people. Great

General, please tell me who else would have the guts to marry into his residence.”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked speechless. He remembered during Lu Buwei’s birthday feast, Zhu Ji’s defensive looking eyes were full of vicious hatred, her whole demeanor was icy. Zhu Ji has really changed too much.

Ever since Lu Buwei caused the death of King Zhuangxiao, something went wrong in her psychology.

But still, he did not expect her to turn into such a terrible woman.

Yang Yu continued, “Besides Meimei was just putting on a show with him. Initially she was indeed charmed by his suave and handsome exterior but ever since she heard from Bai Lei the atrocious acts he has done in the past, she only developed feelings of detest and none of joy.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that Bai lei must have heard about Lao Ai’s atrocities from Han Xie and knowing Han Xie, he’ll definitely spare no mercy with his tongue and pepper the stories.

But then again, Lao Ai does deserve it.

Yang Yu’s expression suddenly softened as she looked at him with great affection, “Only Master Xiang has the best reputation. Even your enemies can’t come out with anything bad you’ve done. At first we did not understand, but after we’ve seen how understanding Master Xiang was when we kept offending you, knowing that we were forced into it and

even treating us with courtesy, we were secretly very grateful.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a wry smile, “It’s most difficult trying to be a good person. Honestly, regarding Lu Buwei’s intention to marry Meimei as his concubine, it’s very difficult for me to interfere and besides, there is no reason for me to interfere.”

Yang Yu replied confidently, “But at least there are two ways Master Xiang can help Meimei. The simplest way is of course for Master Xiang to make Meimei your own concubine but I know very well that this request is overboard and it will also result in enmity between Master Xiang and Lord Lao.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “What about the other solution?”

Yang Yu chewed on her lower lip as she said, “Help her escape from Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong asked quizzically, “Helping her leave the country is an easy task for me. I just need to give my instructions and it will be done but the problem is, she is such a beauty that no matter where she goes, there will be people who hanker after her beauty. So isn’t it out of the frying pan and into the fire? If she bumps into bandits or hooligans, her outcome will be worse than anyone can imagine.”

Yang Yu said elatedly, “As long as Master Xiang is agreeable than everything’s fine. Meimei has a royalty from Wei who admires her and has on many occasions sent his men here to beg Meimei to go to Daliang. If Master Xiang were to send

men to inform him and ask him to send his people to receive her at the border, then Meimei's safety will not be a problem."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Who is this royalty?"

Yang Yu whispered, "It was Crown Prince of Wei, who used to be held hostage in Xianyang but later escaped back to Daliang."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly enlightened.

It seems that Dan Meimei is not really in love with him, but if she becomes the Crown Princess, it's much better than to become Lu Buwei's sex object.

Xiang Shaolong knows himself very well, he is not one to harden his heart and refuse to help so he replied with a wry smile, "All right, you'll tell Meimei to feign illness, even Wu Fu is not allowed to see her. When everyone is attending the feast tonight, I'll send men to send her away and travel through the night. On top of that I will send fast horses to inform the Crown prince and Lord Longyang. The only problematic thing is that we have to make it look as if Meimei ran away on her own so that it will not implicate Miss Yu and the others."

Yang Yu threw herself into his arms in joy, her eyes red.

Xiang Shaolong was shaken as he exclaimed, "If you want to thank me, sit down properly quick."

Yang Yu couldn't care less and gave him a big kiss on the lips before she moved a small distance away, her eyes watery as

she choked in tears, "Even if Meimei and I try to repay you till our deaths, it is still not enough to repay Master Xiang's magnanimity in forgiving us for our past misdeeds."

Only then is Xiang Shaolong sure that this is not a trap for if it is, Yang Yu must be an award winning actress. Besides, there's no need for him to be personally involved in this matter so it'll be impossible if they want to harm him.

After discussing the details for contact with Yang Yu, he asked in passing, "Why aren't you leaving together with Meimei?"

Yang Yu glanced at him awkwardly, wanting to speak out but stopped herself. Finally she lowered her head, her pretty face blushing. Her behavior was extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened as he exclaimed, "So Miss Yu is in love with Guan Zhongxie."

Yang Yu shook her head, "How could it be him? That is a cold blooded and heartless person. Every time after he's had his fun with me, he'd chase me away immediately, saying that he's not used to sleeping with others. A man like that, only Third Missy Lu would take a liking to him."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Of course he wouldn't treat Lu Niangrong the same way. I know, it must be that fellow Xu Shang, he is indeed very handsome."

Yang Yu chewed on her lips without saying anything but her expression was filled with worry and helplessness. Only after a long pause did she say, "It's the same everywhere I go. If



Lu Buwei forces me to become his concubine, I can only submit to my fate. But Meimei is a lot stronger than me. Hai, I'm afraid Master Xiang will not believe me even if I say it but I have no wish to lie to Master Xiang in any matter. Meimei's suicide attempt is just a farce Meimei and I thought of to delay Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, "I'm already very careful but I was still duped by both of you."

Yang Yu promised, "Now there's nothing we're hiding from you. Initially I dare not come and look for Master Xiang at all but Meimei said you're the only person who can help her and will certainly help her. Because she knows that Master Xiang is a natural born, true and chivalric hero."

Xiang Shaolong added wryly again, "She's really accurate in her assessment of this great fool here."

Yang Yu wiped away her tears and revealed a charming smile, "Meimei said, if Master Xiang doesn't want her, then just send her away. Hai, which girl in Xianyang city now does not wish to marry into Master Xiang's family?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought her formidable. If a woman wants to get into the good books of a man, a 'professional' like Yang Yu will certainly be very outstanding, so much so that even if one knows that it's just false flattery, he'll still feel good hearing it.

At least there are still Guiyan, Lu Niangrong and even Yingying have no wish to marry him, Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong saw that there's not much time left since now he has to arrange for Dan Meimei to escape Xianyang, prepare to attend the feast at the palace tonight and also worried that Ji Yanran and the rest will have some misunderstanding so he hurriedly send Yang Yu off on her way.

After Yang Yu left, the first thing Xiang Shaolong did was to look for Zhao Da because he had once stayed with Zhao Ya in Daliang for a long period of time so he is most familiar with the local situation. He is the most appropriate person to be in charge of this matter.

Dan Meimei is gone just like that. The most unlucky person will be Wu Fu and this can possibly force him to take one step further to ally himself with him and become a useful pawn in Lu Buwei's organization.

Zhao Da thought it would be some dangerous mission and on hearing that it's only to send Dan Meimei to the Wei border, he agreed happily.

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner residence, he thought that Ji Yanran and the rest would have been garbed in finery and waiting to attend the feast. Instead, his wives and maids were having fun with the kids, still dressed in their day to day wear and doesn't look like they're planning to attend the feast at all.

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled, "Aren't you going to join in the festivities?"

Ji Yanran lay languidly on the cushions and she replied

tiredly, "My lord husband seems to have forgotten who had to lift up that dragon tail to slap the river the whole morning, and who was made to stand for hours in court to read the edicts like a punishment. I had thought of going but after my bath I seem to have suddenly lost all my energy. I just want to do nothing at all, and have no energy to think of why my lord husband was chatting half the night away with a lady from Drunken Wind Loft."

Xiang Shaolong was initially filled with pity, then he was almost filled with fury as he knelt down and kissed her cheek and at the same time asked Wu Tingfang, "What about the rest of you?"

Zhao Zhi pouted her lips, "Since Sister Yanran is not going, would we have the mood to go?"

Xiang Shaolong is finally gaining some understanding as he raised his arms in surrender, "God be my witness, I, Xiang Shaolong and Yang Yu had never had any past entanglements, and it's the same for today. The reason she..."

Ji Yanran suddenly covered his mouth with her hand as she said with a laugh, "Don't be overly suspicious, we were just making fun of you!"

Wu Tingfang chuckled charmingly, "But it's true we won't be attending the feast. The sight of Lu Buwei makes me think of... hai, don't talk about it."

Looking at her darkened expression, Xiang Shaolong immediately thought of his lovely Zhao Qian and Chunying,

and understood her meaning.

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng came over and helped him up to assist him in his bath.

After he was appropriately dressed, he went to the hall where Teng Yi and Jing Jun were chatting idly with Tao Fang as they waited for him.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Have Zhao Da informed you about Dan Meimei's matter?"

Teng Yi nodded his head, "It's just a small matter. But if it can anger Lu Buwei and cause trouble for Wu Fu, it's a happy task."

Jing Jun sighed, "Dan Meimei is precisely clear about this point, so she's not worried that you will not agree. This woman is indeed very beautiful."

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened by his words and immediately his impression of Yang Yu dropped. He is really too ready to look at on the bright side of things.

Tao Li said, "I saw Tu Xian earlier and he asked me if the Black Dragon is Shaolong's idea. I dare not lie to him and Tu Xian wants me to tell you that he is really impressed with you. This marvelous plan is even better than stabbing Lu Buwei with your sword. Lu Buwei was livid with anger when he went home and guessed that it was us who came up with all this balderdash but there's nothing he could do at all. Tu Xian said with Lu Buwei's character, he may choose to take a risk and told us to be even more careful."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled as he bowed his head in humble acknowledgement. Indeed victory has gone up to his head and he is on cloud nine, and this is very dangerous.

Teng Yi smiled, "Guan Zhongxie arrested a group of people but from what I see they are innocents. He's thinking of using these people as scapegoats but they were taken away by our Minister of Justice so he can't torture a confession out of them. This time even Guan Zhongxie has lost his authority."

Jing Jun complained, "The sight of Guoxing irks me yet Third Brother wants me to teach him the ropes. Ai!"

Xiang Shaolong grabbed his arms and pulled him closer, saying with a serious expression, "A fault confessed is half redressed. Xiao Jun, just be kindhearted this one time and give him a chance!"

Teng Yi stood up and announced, "It's almost time, let us leave for the Palace!"

Xiang Shaolong reminded him, "Remember to bring your Mozi sword. Tonight will be filled with great performances."

Tao Fang was surprised, "How can such things happen? This is the royal feast of Great Qin, without the approval of the ruler, who dares to create trouble?"

Xiang Shaolong tapped the Hundred Battles Sword hanging from his waist and laughed, "We are the ones the ruler gave approval to, to save us the trouble of finding the Warrior School again in future."

Only then did Teng and Jing understand.

Xiang Shaolong led the way and walked towards the main door as he chortled, "Birth of the Black Dragon. It's a sign from heaven and also a joyous occasion. We'll just wish Qiu Risheng an early happy new year."

Teng, Jing and Tao laughed as they ran after him and stepped out together.

The 18 elite guards and the personal guards of Teng, Jing and Tao were already waiting outside with the horses.

After the four of them mounted their horses, they swept out of the main gates towards the direction of the Palace.

The whole of Xianyang City was covered with night fog and it looked eerily like a ghost city.

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of his impending return to the relaxing farm, he was in a happier mood.

Ever since Zhao Qian and the rest unfortunately lost their lives in another land, he has not felt so carefree like what he is feeling now, no longer having the feeling that he is being crushed by an invisible burden so heavy that he cannot breath.

# VOLUME 20

## CHAPTER 1

### *A Union Of Mutual Benefit*

[Translated by JEAN]

UNDER the escort of the 18 elite guards, Xiang Shaolong, together with his brothers Teng and Jing, and Tao Fang made

their way towards the Palace. Suddenly they could hear hoof beats from the front and in the dark fog a lone rider was racing towards them, with another 10 odd riders chasing after him. It looked as if the long street has become a lane for races.

Teng Yi shouted, "Stop your horses."

The rider in front has rode into the ring of light cast by the lanterns and they could see he was bleeding all over his body as he shouted, "Great General save me."

Everyone took a closer look and was shocked to see that it was Guoxing.

Guoxing wanted to rein in his horse but obviously he could not hold up any longer as he fell sideways to the left of the horse.

Just before the warhorse skidded to a stop and Guoxing was about to crash onto the ground, the sound of the bowstring quivering was heard as an arrow was shot out from the hands of one of the riders at the back. It's accuracy was so unbelievable as it entered the back of Guoxing's neck and exited from the front of his neck. By the time Guoxing reached the ground, he is already a lifeless corpse.

Even though Xiang Shaolong's reflexes had always been fast, the scene was enough to make his body go numb.

The 18 elite guards drew their bows in unison and swiftly cocked their arrows.

The group of riders rode up to where Guoxing had fallen and



reined in their horses. The leader, Guan Zhongxie was hanging his bow back onto his horse's back as he said loudly, "Commander Xiang have seen it for yourself, Guoxing tried to escape in guilt and your subordinate had no choice but to carry out orders and have him killed."

Xiang Shaolong's whole body went cold and at the same time a storm of fury went up in him. With a 'clang!', he drew out his Hundred Battles Sword and said with a cold snort, "Guan Zhongxie how dare you kill my Deputy Commander right in front of my face?"

Guan Zhongxie's personal guards raised their shields and went in front of him, forming a wall of shields.

Guan Zhongxie replied with a composed smile, "Commander Xiang please do not be mistaken and listen to my explanation. I am under his Majesty's order to arrest the killers who tried to assassinate his Majesty this morning and I found out that the killers were in cahoots with the owner of the Warrior School, Qiu Risheng, who brought them to Xianyang. Now Qiu Risheng and all the killers are arrested and Minister Lu questioned them personally. That Guoxing resisted arrest and ran away as Commander Xiang can very well see. If I have failed my duty in any way, you can always bring it up to his Majesty, Minister Lu and the Dowager."

He then added in a shout, "Take away the body!"

For a moment Xiang Shaolong did not know how to react as well as he shouted, "No one's allowed to touch him!"

Since Guan Zhongxie has gained the upper hand, he just

laughed and said, "Commander Xiang has given his orders, would I dare to disobey? Let us leave!"

He slapped his horse and went away.

His men retreated on their horses for ten odd steps before shouting in unison as they turned their horses' head around and ran after Guan Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest looked at one another, their eyes finally resting on Guoxing's body, lying in a pool of blood with an arrow in his neck.

Tao Fang sighed, "In the end we still underestimated Lu Buwei. This move is indeed extremely vicious, not only destroying the Warrior School and at the same time cause us and Lao Ai a loss of face. He can also point the finger towards Lao Ai, or even Du Bi and Pu Hu now."

Teng Yi said seriously, "Maybe Lu Buwei will make use of this opportunity to cause more trouble and deal with Lao Ai and his men."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, "He definitely will not be able to touch Lao Ai. Xiao Jun, send some men to help settle Guoxing's funeral affair and at the same time protect his family. I will enter the Palace immediately to see his Majesty and discuss how we should handle this matter."

He nudged his horse's belly and rode forward, unable to take another look at Guoxing's gruesome outcome.

All along, although Guan Zhongxie is his enemy, he still felt there are certain similarities between them and there's an

inkling of understanding.

But at this moment, he only wants to tear him in pieces and he won't feel an ounce of pity at all.

When he reached the main road leading towards the Palace, it was jam packed with humans and carriages. The officials and royalty all behaved as if they had no idea of the bloody exchanges in Xianyang City and were all happily on their way to attend the feast.

When he reached the Palace gates, he met Lord Changwen, who came up to him with a grave expression and said, "His Majesty happens to be looking for Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly remembered something and instantly broke out in sweat as he told Teng Yi, "Xianyang City will definitely be heavily guarded tonight, Zhao Da and Dan Meimei..."

Teng Yi was hugely shaken as he replied, "I understand!" before turning back.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly instructed Lord Wenchang to send a team of Imperial Guards to follow Teng Yi and protect him before he entered the Palace to attend to the summons.

He still can't come to terms with Guoxing's death.

Indeed his head has been clouded by victory, that he didn't even think about how widely spread is Lu Buwei's power in Xianyang City.

With his intelligence, how can he not come to the conclusion

that with the assassination attempt on Xiao Pan's life, Du Bi and Pu Hu will certainly become implicated.

Now that Lu Buwei has arrested Qiu Risheng, it's obvious that he wants to deal with Lao Ai.

But he knows very well, or rather he knows from history that before Lao Ai public rebellion, there is nothing Lu Buwei can do to Lao Ai.

Once one makes an enemy out of Lu Buwei, one careless mistake can mean a huge loss.

Once he thought of how Guo Xing had just offered his allegiance and ended up being shot dead by Guan Zhongxie right in front of his eyes, the sense of fury and helplessness really made him feel the impulse to immediately rouse his Wu family's elite warriors and kill their way into Lu's residence.

At this point in time Xiao Pan is in the study talking with his trusted aides Lord Changping, Li Si, Wang Chi and Wang Ling, his expression strangely calm. When he saw him coming, he called out joyously, "Grand Tutor, dispense with ceremony."

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to suppress his tumultuous emotions and sat down below Wang Chi, asking solemnly, "What's the current situation?"

Wang Chi replied, "Guan Zhongxie sprung a surprise attack on the Warrior School earlier, Chang Jie and An Jinliang were killed immediately. Qiu Risheng's right arm was shattered when they beat him with poles and the 200 odd warriors in

the school were all arrested. On top of that, they questioned two of the injured assassins and obtained evidence. There's no way Qiu Risheng can deny anything."

Li Si who was sitting opposite added, "Those people have been sent to my place, including Qiu Risheng, who all insisted they were under the orders of Lao Ai. Because the re-opening of the Weinan Warrior School was all due to the support and protection of Lao Ai, it'll be very difficult for Lao Ai to keep himself out of this matter."

Xiao Pan said, "I was looking for Grand Tutor because I want everyone to have a discussion, should we make use of this matter to get rid of Lao Ai?"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly understood. Although Xiao Pan was forced to accept his marvelous plan of using Lao Ai to curb Lu Buwei, but in face his hatred for Lao Ai is overwhelming because Lao Ai has taken Zhu Ji's attention away from him.

Xiao Pan would very much like to find a chance to seriously hurt Zhu Ji in order to satiate the anger in his heart. Now that the Black Dragon is born, he is no longer so afraid of Lu Buwei like in the past, that's why he feels that this idea is extremely tempting.

Once he, Xiang Shaolong, nods his head a little, Xiao Pan will give the orders. And maybe the other person who hates Lao Ai more than Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei will immediately send his men to kill all of Lao Ai's family and warriors, really castrate him and only hand him to Li Si, the Minister of Justice after beating him to submission.

Zhu Ji herself holds no real power and if Xiao Pan doesn't stand on her side, Lu Buwei will be able to do whatever he likes.

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh, "Where is Lao Ai now?"

Lord Changwen answered, "He and a huge group of his trusted warriors have hidden themselves at Sweet Spring Palace. The Dowager sent her people here to summon his Majesty twice but was rejected subtly both times."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize the danger of the situation. Things are happening too fast, Lu Buwei must have known long ago that Qiu Risheng is connected to this matter so he deliberately planned his attack before the start of the feast so that everyone will not be able to react in time.

Everyone's gaze landed on him, they obviously know Xiao Pan's intention and they dare not object, neither do they wish to object. So they're waiting for him, the person who can influence the future Emperor Qin's decision, to speak up.

In fact, Xiang Shaolong is hard pressed to find a strong reason why he should object.

He saw Xiao Pan's bright eyes, staring unwaveringly at him, filled with yearning and anticipation.

Ultimately Xiao Pan still treats him different from the others. Even though his authority is growing day by day, in the end he will still steadfastly respect his opinions.

He gave a sigh before he told them that Guo Xieng was killed

right in front of his eyes.

Everyone's countenance changed.

Wang Ling cried out with fury, "This is going overboard."

Xiang Shaolong said calmly, "No one in here will give any sigh of regret over Lao Ai's death but we must also consider the consequences."

He then gave Li Si a look.

This can be considered a chance for Li Si to show if he is indeed a true friend.

Currently, besides Xiang Shaolong, the only other person Xiao Pan trusts the most is Li Si. The others fall way behind.

Li Si is an extremely smart person and knows what Xiang Shaolong is thinking of. He nodded his head slightly in affirmation and said, "If we get rid of Lao Ai now, the person most affected would of course be the Dowager. If this were to happen, the Dowager's power will be shaken and it'll be difficult for her to interfere in court affairs. Under such circumstances, if Lu Buwei join forces with the senior officials in court, maybe he will really be able to become the Regent. Then the current favorable situation we created with the Black Dragon will go down the drain."

Wang Chi said solemnly, "We can always propose Shaolong become the Regent in his capacity as the Grand Tutor, especially since Shaolong has already proven his merit by saving his Majesty. Besides, with the birth of the Black Dragon, Wang Guan, Cai Ze and the rest knows who the true

ruler is. Even if Lu Buwei wants to twist the situation, I'm afraid there's nothing much he can do."

Lord Changwen agreed, "There is no one else more suitable to become the Regent other than Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, "Naturally I am very happy that his Majesty and all of you think so highly of me but since Lu Buwei chose to make things difficult for Lao Ai this time, it must be because he's worried that we will remove Guan Zhongxie from his post and he may not be able to point the finger at the Dowager. Obviously he has something up his sleeves and his ultimate motive will be to deal with our precious dragon."

Xiao Pan was silent for a moment before he nodded his head, "Even we know that Qiu Risheng is in cahoots with Du Bi and Pu Hu so there's no reason for Lu Buwei not to know. But this time his only target is Lao Ai, with no mention of Du Bi and Pu Hu at all. There must be more to this."

Li Si's expression changed, "Could it be that Lu Buwei has already reached a secret agreement with Du Bi and Pu Hu to sacrifice Qiu Risheng in order to topple Lao Ai and the Dowager. Then next he'll just have to... hei!"

Everyone's expression changed immediately.

Lord Changwen exclaimed hoarsely, "This is definitely not without basis. Because when Pu Hu was on the way back from the religious rite, he was invited by Lu Buwei to share his carriage. Maybe they've reached an agreement in the carriage."



This is politics.

No matter how impossible it seems, but under the sudden change of circumstances, enemies may become collaborators after weighing the pros and cons.

From Lu Buwei's perspective, he is already on opposing ends with Lao Ai and Zhu Ji. The political corporation with Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong as the leader is all the more causing him hate. If he did not have the support of Meng Ao's power, he would have lost his life long ago. But if he collaborates with Cheng Qiao, who cares only for gains, his situation will naturally be very different.

Xiao Pan said with a somber expression, "I had not considered this point."

Wang Ling heaved out a cold breath, "Ever since Black Dragon was born, Lu Buwei and Du Bi were at a loss and in their effort to regain their authority, it's not surprising that they will do this. The problem now is that all of us dislike Lao Ai, so should we take this opportunity to drag him down?"

Everyone's gaze landed on Xiang Shaolong again.

Once again, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel that fate cannot be changed. Lao Ai is fated not to die so early, that's why this thought suddenly sprouted in all their heads.

To Lu Buwei, Cheng Qiao's influence is so much lower than Xiao Pan's, and Du Bi and Pu Hu will never be the match of Wang Chi, Li Si and the rest of their own people. So if Cheng Qiao replaces Xiao Pan as the ruler of Qin, he can only be a

puppet ruler and will never be able to have a mind of his own.

From this it can be seen that he is now utterly disappointed in his 'son' Xiao Pan.

He smiled and said, "What is Lao Ai? Right now our biggest enemy is only Lu Buwei so for now the smartest thing to do is to keep Lao Ai to keep Lu Buwei in check and after that try to get rid of Cheng Qiao and the rest. By then we won't have to worry what Lu Buwei will be capable of doing."

Xiao Pan is still a little worried as he asked with a furrowed brow, "Then how should we deal with Cheng Qiao?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "That's easy. Order him to lead an army to take down the state of Zhao, and his relationship with the Zhao will come to light."

Everyone marveled at the brilliant suggestion.

This is the importance of information. If Xiang Shaolong is not aware of the relationship between Pu Hu and General Peng Ai from Zhao, he won't be able to think of such a marvelous plan.

Xiao Pan was stunned for a moment before he chortled out in laughter, "There's no simpler and more direct way than this, but we must wait for the right time. The Black Dragon has just been born recently, I still need some time to consolidate my power."

After Li Si became the Minister of Justice, his status has changed greatly. He is no longer trying to conceal his abilities

as he announced, "Since that is the case, then we should let Lao Ai know very clearly that Lu Buwei wants to destroy him, then he'll be at greater odds with Lu Buwei."

Wang Ling said somberly, "But there's pros and cons to this. We can imagine that after this incident, the Dowager will be clear that Lao Ai's power is too little and in future will go all out to help him fight for more power."

Wang Chi snorted, "No matter how hard she fights, he will never be able to become a Great General, so what good use can he be?"

Xiao Pan stood up and the rest hurriedly stood up and bowed.

Xiao Pan said energetically, "I will go and host the Spring Feast immediately. Grand Tutor Xiang can bring a team of Imperial Guards to escort the Dowager and that fake eunuch to the Palace to attend the feast. Just take it that his life is still not the end this time."

He then gave a cold snort before leaving.

The rest hurried after him.

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of visiting Zhu Ji, he immediately felt a headache coming on.

Who would have expected that situations will suddenly arise. He'll be grateful if his plan of taking a long 'vacation' is not disrupted because of this.

Xiang Shaolong led the 18 Guardsmen and a 50-strong team

from Xiao Pan's best Imperial guards and went grandly to the Sweet Spring Palace. A group of warriors dashed out from the side to block their paths.

Xiang Shaolong had already guessed that Guan Zhongxie would order his men to surround Sweet Spring Palace so he unsheathed his Hundred Battles Sword and shouted, "Who dares to stop me, Xiang Shaolong."

The Guardsmen and Imperial guards roared as they brandished their shields, bows and spears and made a formation, protecting Xiang Shaolong right in the middle with their arrows and spears pointing outwards, ready to fly out at any moment.

None of those warriors dare to retaliate as they fled from all sides.

The drawbridge to Sweet Spring Palace was drawn and the gates shut tightly.

Xiang Shaolong and his men went to the little moat protecting the palace and reined in their horses.

Guan Zhongxie led Xu Shang and 50 to 60 warriors and went up to them, the former asking icily, "Haven't Commander Xiang gone to join in the Spring Feast?"

Xiang Shaolong thought of Guoxing and wished he could kill him with a stab now. He waited until he came near and reined in his horse before saying with a smile, "If I were to throw my flying needles at Official Guan, I wonder how confident will you be at avoiding them?"

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang's expression paled at the same time, their eyes on his right hand which he deliberately left hanging near the horse's body. The former managed to force out a smile and say, "Commander Xiang must be joking, death will of course be my only outcome."

Xiang Shaolong gave a nonchalant reply, "The both of you had better not move rashly, I am not joking. By surrounding Sweet Spring Palace like this, the both of you have already committed the offence of offending the Dowager. If I were to execute the both of you, who would dare to say that I've done wrong."

Xu Shang's reply was calm and steady, "Great General Xiang is mistaken, we are just under Lu Buwei's orders to protect her Majesty!"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and said, "So I see, in that case you can retreat immediately, just leave the task of protecting her to me."

A flash of anger was seen on Guan Zhongxie's features as he lowered his head, "As the Great General commands."

He shouted, "Everyone, retreat!"

He turned his horse's head and galloped away.

Sounds of hooves galloping rose.

In an instant all the warriors were gone.

Xiang Shaolong called out towards the gates of Sweet Spring Palace, "Lord Ai please lower the drawbridge."

Sounds of machinery were heard as the drawbridge lowered. Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to keep their weapons and led the way, marching grandly into the Palace.

He had just stepped past the gates when Lao Ai, Han Xie, Ling Qi, Lao Si came up to him, all dressed to fight.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse and extended his hand to shake hands with Lao Ai as he said with a laugh, "Lord Lao, please forgive Shaolong for coming late. Is the Dawager alarmed?"

Lao Ai had a look of gratitude as he said quietly, "This matter..."

## CHAPTER 2

## Failure Despite Preparations

[Translated by JEAN]

AFTER Zhu Ji instructed Xiang Shaolong to sit next to her, she stared at the night scene of Xianyang through the curtains of the carriage.

The main street was packed with joyous Qins who were celebrating the Spring festivities and the birth of the Black Dragon.

Houses were decorated and sounds of firecrackers popped continuously, an especially sharp contrast to Zhu Ji's empty and helpless state of mind.

Ever since King Zhuangxiang passed away, Zhu Ji has never truly been happy.

Her whole life was made possible because of Lu Buwei, but is also destroyed because of Lu Buwei.

Maybe even she herself cannot determine the grudges and gratitude she has with Lu Buwei.

Lao Ai may look like he is successful on the surface, but ultimately he's just a pawn being made use of by the various factions.

What's unexpected is that with Zhu Ji's intellect and formidability, once she's fixated with men, she'd actually become so muddleheaded.

Just as he was secretly lamenting, Zhu Ji's fragrant lips gently asked, "Shaolong! What should I do in future?"

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt as if he has once again stepped into the time machine and has gone back to the days in Handan when he first met Zhu Ji. He was stunned, "Your Majesty..."

Then he's at a loss for words.

Zhu Ji turned her delicate body and stared at him as she said, "Sorry!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Why do you say that?"

Zhu Ji lowered her head and replied piteously, "I myself have no idea what I'm doing. But sometimes, I really wish that someone would kill you."



Xiang Shaolong knows she's referring to her approval of the duel between him and Guan Zhongxie so he sighed and said, "I will never blame your Majesty, no matter what, I will never blame you."

Zhu Ji's delicate body shuddered as she lifted her head to look at him. After a long moment, she suddenly said, "Is that Black Dragon real or a fake, I beg you do not keep it from me."

A sudden fury rose in Xiang Shaolong, knowing that Zhu Ji is still making plans for Lao Ai. He said icily, "Of course it's real, can such a thing be faked?"

Zhu Ji stared at him morosely for a moment before she turned back to look out the window again, saying with a wry smile, "Shaolong, you're angry. Sometimes I really wish that you'd hit me or scold me, then I'll feel a little better."

She paused and continued, "I know you too well. From the way you answered me just now, I know that is a fake dragon. Such a grand plan, you must be the one who thought of it because no one would be able to pull off such a trick better than you."

Xiang Shaolong felt heated as a feeling so strange that even he cannot understand rose up in him. He went near to her tiny ear and said gently, "Right now I really feel like giving your Majesty a thorough beating!"

Zhu Ji's delicate body trembled and with an "Ah!", turned her body around, a mixed yet ecstatic look shot out from her eyes.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to seal her fragrant lips with a kiss, the carriage stopped suddenly. They have arrived at the Palace.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed.

There can never be even a slight change in Fate after all.

When Zhu Ji arrived at the feast, Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and the other officials welcomed her warmly as usual, everyone behaved as if nothing has ever happened.

Pu Hu and Du Bi also attended the feast, their expression serene.

If Qiu Risheng were to have the chance to come here and take a look, he will surely feel that his sacrifice is not worth it at all.

However Xiang Shaolong was in a bad mood over Guoxing's death and when he was seated at Li Si and Lord Changping's table, he asked quietly, "Where is Guan Zhongxie?"

Both of them heard his menacing tone and was shocked. They asked in unison, "What does Shaolong plan to do?"

By now Xiang Shaolong has found Guan Zhongxie, who was seated about five tables below him along the line. He was talking to Lu Nianrong, Xu Shang and Lian Jiao.

Lord Changping tried to lighten the atmosphere and said with a laugh, "Those three talented ladies indeed live up to their reputation. Although their song has ended, it seems that the her alluring voice is still reverberating in my ears."

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and said, "I want to kill Guan Zhongxie!"

The both of them were utterly shocked and left speechless for a moment. Li Si could only utter, "Shaolong please think it over."

At this point in time Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and a group of senior officials have just finished taking turns to offer a toast to Zhu Ji and were all seated in their respective places. The grand hall, which can seat a thousand odd people quiet down as they waited for Zhu Ji to speak.

Fury raged through Xiang Shaolong as he suddenly stood up. Everyone's eyes were immediately attracted to him as they concentrated on him.

Xiang Shaolong stood up with a grand aura and said loudly, "The last time I had a duel with Official Guan, the duel had to be stopped because Official Guan's sword was broken. I see today that Official Guan is carrying another precious weapon and suddenly my hands are itching for a fight. I hope to have another duel again with Official Guan, to liven the atmosphere up. Would your Majesty and the Dowager please grant me this request."

The great Hall was suddenly quiet, everyone was taken aback, obviously no one expected Xiang Shaolong would do something like that.

In fact, for the last two duels, Xiang Shaolong was forced into battle. Only this time, because of his anger over Guo Xing's

death, he volunteered for the duel.

Right at this moment, everyone knows that Xiang Shaolong is really furious at Guan Zhongxie and is determined to kill him.

Lu Buwei's expression changed slightly. He gave a cold snort and hurriedly reply before Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji could say anything, "It's a joyous occasion tonight, it's not appropriate to flash weapons around. If Shaolong, because of personal grudges..."

There was a long laugh, which came from Lao Ai. He sniggered, "That's a poor remark from Lord Lu. Was the last duel a day of great sadness for you? Then why were you wholly supporting that duel?"

Lu Buwei's eyes shone brightly as he stared hard at Lao Ai for a moment. He was about to retort when Guan Zhongxie stood up and said, "Commander Xiang have very sharp eyes indeed to be able to tell that my new sword 'Shooting Sun' is a rare treasure from the state of Qi and not easily broken. That's what aroused his interest and if your Majesties and Lord Lu allows, Zhongxie would be most happy to oblige."

Xiao Pan laughed, "That's what a good son of the Great Qin should be like, would the Dowager please grant this request."

Zhu Ji looked intently at Xiang Shaolong for quite sometime before her pretty eyes revealed a look of gratitude as she nodded her head, "Our Great Qin has always protected our country with military finesse, and these two beloved officials

have embraced the importance of our Great Qin's military essence. I give my blessings."

Xiang Shaolong knows that Zhu Ji has misunderstood him, thinking that he is venting his frustration on Guan Zhongxie because of the humiliation she had suffered. But he couldn't be too bothered about this right now and after thanking her for her approval, he and Guan Zhongxie left their seats to walk towards the center of the hall.

Everyone could feel the atmosphere that is so heavy that it makes one unable to breath.

This is the third time the both of them are dueling.

Both times, Guan Zhongxie was disadvantaged; will he be able to turn the situation around this time?

On a certain level, Xiang Shaolong is indeed taking a risk this time. Or maybe it's better to say that this risk is not worth taking.

The first time Guan Zhongxie could not defeat Xiang Shaolong is because he thought that there's no point for him getting injured over a man whom he thinks won't have long to live. The second time he lost because he was taken aback as he has absolutely no knowledge of the Hundred Battles Swordplay, and yet he could use the excuse of his broken sword to escape with his life with no injuries at all.

This time Guan Zhongxie already has the experience of dealing with the Hundred Battles Swordplay and he will certainly go all out in this death match to preserve his life. In

such a situation, indeed no one knows what will be the outcome.

That's why Li Si advised him to reconsider.

But the Xiang Shaolong at this point in time has totally forgotten about life, death, glory or fame. He could only feel that if he allows Guoxing's murderer to continue roaming freely right in front of his eyes, he will be truly letting down this subordinate who had just pledged his loyalty to him.

In this instant, he has become a true warrior.

Other things are not taken into consideration at all.

Guan Zhongxie is not Lu Buwei. Not a single piece of history or movie has ever said if he will survive this night.

Lu Nianrong who was seated at her table has turned as white as a piece of paper.

No one knows better than her how Xiang Shaolong currently feels about his relentless urge to kill Guan Zhongxie.

Earlier on, Guan Zhongxie was discussing with Xu Shang and Liao Jiao the matter of killing Guoxing right in front of Xiang Shaolong's eyes.

She was already feeling very unsettled then, knowing that Xiang Shaolong will not take this lying down but she did not expect Xiang Shaolong would so angrily challenge Guan Zhongxie into a duel the moment he stepped in.

There's another factor Xiang Shaolong considered, which is Guan Zhongxie's archery skills are too formidable. If there's

open warfare in future, once he takes out his strong bow, no one knows who in the opposing army will be able to stay alive. So if he can get rid of him earlier, it would mean saving his own, or even Teng Yi, Jing Jun or one of his men's lives earlier.

This fear that was hidden deeply in his subconscious is enough to make him determined to kill Guan Zhongxie regardless of the price he'll have to pay.

The two of them went together to pay their respects to Xiao Pan, and Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji, who were seated on either side. Then they split up and each holding their weapons, stood a few feet away from each other, facing off the other party coldly. Because of their special status, the two of them were able to carry their weapons although they're in the Palace.

Right until now, no one has made a single noise.

The weapons have not left their sheaths, yet the whole hall became icy with a deadly aura because of everyone's silence and the tense atmosphere before a storm. The pressure seems to increase around the nose and mouth area, making one unable to breathe smoothly.

Both of them looked as if they're eyeing a prey and after staring at each other for some time, Guan Zhongxie bent his back slightly. The increased aura is enough to make one's mood so tense that one cannot breath.

A cold look shot past Xiang Shaolong's eyes, but unlike the last time, he did not hold on to his Hundred Battles Blade's

sheath, making others wonder why he did not make use of his sheath as well like he did the last time.

They saw him walk a step forward sharply.

Guan Zhongxie's back was bent like a bow, like a ferocious beast who is about to charge. Compared to the last time he faced Xiang Shaolong, his confidence and aura is many times multiplied.

Xiang Shaolong seemed unfazed.

These past few days, he has been awake before dawn to practice his swordplay and felt that his condition has reached this highest peak that he has never achieved ever since he arrived through the time machine.

If he cannot win Guan Zhongxie tonight, he can forget about ever winning him in future.

Of course!

This is purely a feel on his part.

It doesn't affect whether it's truly the case or not.

Right at this time, Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Blade left its sheath, changing into a flash of lightning as it pierced through the air yet giving one a strange feeling of lightness and weightlessness. Compared to the last time, which seemed like a fierce thunderstorm, it is even more indescribable.

Guan Zhongxie was obviously very surprised but of course he can't slowly appreciate its beauty like what the others are



doing. He immediately dashed forward to attack, pulling his sword out speedily.

Both their movements were as fast as lightning, such that the audience can't even have a good look.

"Clang!"

Guan Zhongxie staggered back violently three steps.

But the martial arts experts like Han Xie, Xu Shang etc could all tell that it was a deliberate retreat by Guan Zhongxie, using his deft moves and battle skills to nullify and expand Xiang Shaolong's shocking Hundred Battles Swordplay.

So although Guan Zhongxie retreated three steps, he did not reveal any look of defeat.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Guan Zhongxie would make use of this strategy and can't help but be stunned. He was about to continue with his attack when a fierce ray of light flashed past Guan Zhongxie's eyes as his tongue unfurled in a roar and it was like a thunderclap appearing on the ground. He leaped forward as his Shooting Sun Sword counterattacked, first dipping down then flipping up again, aiming at Xiang Shaolong's stomach, making Xiang Shaolong unable to counter this move with his chopping stance.

The thousand odd crowd who witnessed this silently, on seeing Guan Zhongxie's sharp and precise attack, were so shocked that they cannot utter even a single sound.

Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort as he moved to the side with his blade moving in waves to block the space where his

chest and stomach was.

With a clash, both of them came together and separated, none gaining even an ounce of advantage.

Guan Zhongxie was secretly ecstatic, knowing that he has gained insight on how to counteract Xiang Shaolong's shocking blade skills, which is to avoid head on attacks and instead use feather light and swift moves to deal with his solidity.

So with no hesitation at all, Shooting Sun Sword made use of the advantage of being the attacker to execute a delicate and intricate move, much like how a weaver girl will weave with her hands and attacked towards Xiang Shaolong like liquid mercury.

Xiang Shaolong looked solemn as he grounded himself, the pain of Guoxing's death welled up in his heart as he forcefully slashed diagonally with his Hundred Battles Blade, forcing Guan Zhongxie to keep a distance from his moving blade.

For a moment the weapons cast shining reflections with strange and mystical moves, making one unable to fathom the movements.

Although Guan Zhongxie tried his best to avoid meeting head on with the blade, it's quite impossible for the blade and sword to not clash.

Even though there are only two men fighting in the arena, the audience all felt as if they are watching a battle between

thousands of soldiers and horses, to the extent that they can imagine the distressing image of bodies filling the battlefield and blood flowing like river.

At this point in time Xiang Shaolong only has one thought, which is to kill Guan Zhongxie in the shortest time possible. Everything else to him is unimportant, including his own life.

He does not know how involved is Guan Zhongxie in Lu Buwei's nefarious plots but this person's intellect is not below that of Mo Ao. Otherwise, just based on his bravery and strength, Lu Buwei will never allow Lu Niangrong to marry him.

As long as Guan Zhongxie remains alive, he can forget about living a carefree life. That's why every move he made is to eradicate his enemy, disregarding his own life in order to kill.

The sounds of the weapons meeting resonated through the hall.

Below Xiao Pan, all of them were staring unwaveringly at the ferocious battle between the two great martial artists.

"Clang!"

After an especially thunderous clash, Guan Zhongxie was finally forced to retreat by Xiang Shaolong's attack.

Using the momentum from the attack and advancing when his enemy is retreating, Xiang Shaolong howled as he attacked with his blade. Waves of blade movements preceded his moving body, rolling towards Guan Zhongxie like tumbling waves.

For the first time, Guan Zhongxie feels at a loss.

Initially he was anxious to attack and very confident that he will be able to kill Xiang Shaolong. However, faced with his opponent's strategy of fighting without care for his own life, which may be filled with loopholes but unless he is willing to forgo his own life together with Xiang Shaolong, there is no way he can make use of these loopholes to attack at all.

Others may not understand why Xiang Shaolong is not using his sheath but he is painfully aware that this is where Xiang Shaolong's excellence lay. Because after his defeat the last time, he'll definitely dissect what went wrong and study how he could deal with Xiang Shaolong's strange fighting method of using his blade on the right hand and the sheath on the left hand. And indeed he made some headway. Because it's difficult to concentrate on the timing between using the blade and sheath to move back and forth, it will affect the dexterity in attacking and defending so it made him think of a way to counteract. But this time Xiang Shaolong is not using the sheath at all and this made his well thought out strategy come to a standstill.

But he's also skillful, coming to an immediate decision to retreat first before attacking, to gain back the upper hand so that Xiang Shaolong will not have the chance to execute the frightening prowess of the Hundred Battles Blade. Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong has managed to gain ground of a three feet radius and with his ferocious and forceful attacks, countering his wave after wave of attacks.

Right until he is at the end of his intense attacks and finding it difficult to maintain his advantage, he was finally forced to retreat by Xiang Shaolong.

Exhausted, how could he resist against Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Blade which is coming to him like a frightening tsunami.

An icy, murderous aura followed Xiang Shaolong's precious blade as it rumbled towards him.

That frightening feeling solidified the intense stress that seems to be locking Guan Zhongxie's soul and body in place and for the first time he felt as if he is powerless to resist.

Suddenly, he realizes that Xiang Shaolong has reached the level of epitome of Grandmaster in his swordplay.

Everyone in the hall held their breath, so quiet that one can even hear a pin drop. The countless shadows made by the Hundred Battles Blade seem to merge into one as it slashed towards its enemy.

Guan Zhongxie, now extremely horrified, can no longer tell the changes in Xiang Shaolong's moves.

"Clang!"

The body and the shadow seemed to split up.

Just as Guan Zhongxie was scrambling back, Xiang Shaolong's blade shone dangerously as it attacked again, not giving his opponent a sliver of opportunity to make a comeback.

Everyone on Lu Buwei's side paled.

Lu Nianrong screamed, "Stop!" and she actually dashed out, ignoring the cries of the others to stop her and ran towards the both of them.

Everyone was utterly astounded.

"Thump, thump thump!"

Xiang Shaolong abruptly flew back.

Guan Zhongxie was almost killed, his long sword flew out from his hand as he staggered backwards and he happened to fall into the arms of Lu Nianrong and the both of them fell to the ground together.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, for although this attack has caused Guan Zhongxie serious injury, it's not enough to take his life. Because he was afraid of accidentally injuring Lu Nianrong, he deliberately made the fatal blow while his opponent still have some strength left in him and thus gave Guan Zhongxie a sliver of opportunity. He only missed taking his life by that little bit.

Blood was seen on both their bodies.

Guan Zhongxie's bloodstain was near his left breast and even his armor was broken. Obviously he barely managed to avoid the blow aimed at his heart. However, he will need at least a few months to recover from his injuries.

Xiang Shaolong's bloodstains were on his left arm and thigh.

Lu Nianrong screamed, "Zhongxie! How are you!"

Guang Zhongxie's face was deathly pale yet he gritted his teeth and said to Xiang Shaolong, "Zhongxie will remember this lesson, and will never forget this blade blow."

Lu Buwei jumped out and shouted, "Hurry up and tend to his injuries,"

A sudden fatigue fell over Xiang Shaolong. He did not expect that even when given such an advantageous situation, Lu Niangrong can still accidentally spoil his whole plan. He fear that such a splendid opportunity will be difficult to come by again.

## CHAPTER 3

## The Joining Of The 5 States

[Translated by JEAN]

THE NEXT DAY Xiang Shaolong used the excuse that he have to rest and tend to his injuries to lead his pretty wives and beloved children as well as the 18 warriors back to the farm. Teng Yi personally led troops to escort them and with Xiao Pan and Lord Chang Ping's agreement, Teng Yi will take over the Military Token while Xiang Shaolong is not around. At the same time Wu Guo will take over Guoxing's duties.

If it was in the past, Lu Buwei will certainly object. But now, as long as Xiao Pan has no objections, military appointments



are controlled by Lord Changping.

Of course, Lu Buwei still holds actual power as the Premier, it's just that now the line between the different duties are very clearly drawn and if he insists on interfering in certain matters, he'll be overstepping his boundary.

No one will be willing to let go of his own power, that's why Lu Buwei made the last struggle by joining forces with Du Bi and Pu Hu.

Power struggles are still on the rise.

After they rode out of Xianyang City, Ji Yanran urged her horse and came up next to Xiang Shaolong, asking with concern, "They wanted me to ask if Lord Husband's injuries are still causing you pain?"

Teng Yi, who was on the other side commented with a laugh, "Yanran, don't you wish to find out too?"

Ji Yanran pouted, "Second Brother, you're making fun of me."

On seeing her extremely alluring and dainty expression, Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel energized and he replied with a smile, "It's just superficial wounds, not worth mentioning."

Teng Yi looked pensive as he said, "After all of you reach the farm, the most important thing is to be careful and set up defenses. I'm really afraid that Lu Buwei will take the risk to sneak an attack again, or get people to deal with you through Du Bi and Pu Hu."

Ji Yanran replied, “His majesty and Lord Changping have just finished studying how they can bring to fruition the plans to control the military. Ever since Lu Buwei appeared, he frivolously made use of the previous king’s trust on him to ensure the generals and military no longer report to the ruler, instead gaining control of the imperial seal privately to mobilize the military. If we can get rid of this bad practice, Lu Buwei can forget about mobilizing troops to deal with us. Otherwise, we’ll just have to move our own warriors and mercenaries out!”

Ever since Shang Yang’s reforms in Qin, the rulers have held tight control over the military, using the system of seal, tally and document.

Seal refers to the ruler’s imperial seal. All military orders and documents, if it’s not affixed with the imperial seal, will be rendered useless. But because Xiao Pan has yet to be crowned, his documents will need the Dowager, Zhu Ji’s additional seal before it can be considered effective.

Tally refers to the Tiger Tally, made of copper with inscriptions carved on its back. It’s in two pieces, to be held by the ruler and the general respectively. It has to be issued by the ruler and checked to ensure its authenticity before one can mobilize troops. But because of Lu Buwei’s tyranny and his excuse that he had to build up the empire and deal with the continuous wars, he held on to the tally and refused to return it. Many times he used his own premier seal in place of Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji’s imperial seals to mess up and take over the ruler’s authority.

Document refers to the travel document that rulers will issue so that troops from far away will be able to travel unhindered through the passes.

The three items: seal, tally and document must all be present in order to be effective. Any mobilization of troops that will amount to more than 50 men must go through this process. But Lu Buwei's authority is higher than his master and since the time of King Zhuangxiang, he has slowly gotten rid of this requirement. Now Xiao Pan has made use of the Black Dragon's reputation and finally managed to right the wrong.

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, "But this is still of not much use against great generals like Meng Ao who have been guarding the borders for decades.

Ji Yanran said with a smile, "This may not have any authority over border generals who already hold the seal, tally and documents but at least we don't have to worry a huge army will come to attack the farm. On top of that, with Huan Qi's swift reinforcement troops, I think we can still get some good days ahead!"

Xiang Shaolong chortled happily, "But if Learned Lady Ji wants to use the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin<sup>19</sup>, you'd better be careful during the journey."

Ji Yanran sighed, "Using the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin. Hai! My husband is so refined that

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<sup>19</sup> A verse from Tang Poet Bai Juyi's poem, *Song of Everlasting Regret*, depicting the tragedy between Emperor Xuanzong and Concubine Yang of Tang dynasty.

it delights Yanran's heart."

Xiang Shaolong's enthusiasm was stirred as he sang loudly, "Using the smooth water of the hot spring to wash her creamy skin, this was when she first received the emperor's favor." and at the same time urged his horse forward with a slap.

During the next few days, Xiang Shaolong enjoyed a carefree life. After practicing his swordplay everyday, he'll either tour the area with his beloved wives, maids and child or practice his horseriding and archery skills. When he's free, he'll study the military stratagems in the Mohist Addendum or discuss world events with Learned Lady Ji to increase his knowledge in the various areas.

Looking at Bao'er growing up stronger and stronger day by day, that sense of joy and satisfaction is something that nothing else can replace.

His father-in-law Wu Yingyuan was busy keeping in contact with Wu Zhuo, who was outside the farm, and would occasionally leave to purchase supplies.

Tao Fang will personally come to the farm regularly to tell him about the latest news in Xianyang.

During this period he only returned to Xianyang twice, to conduct the grand wedding feast of Jing Jun and Lu Dan'er and to attend the wedding of Yang Duan and Ying Ying.

Time flies as summer left and autumn came. On this day, Wang Ling and Lord Changping suddenly came to the farm to

visit him. After not seeing one another for such a long time, it was naturally a joyous reunion.

After dinner, while Wang Ling and Lord Changping were chatting with him in the main hall, the former said solemnly, "The Crown Prince will be 17 years old in a few months, it's time for him to get a Crown Princess. Lu Buwei strongly supports marrying the young princess from the state of Qi and we are strongly opposing."

Xiang Shaolong has already guessed that their sudden long journey to visit him would surely entail some important matter so he asked languidly, "What is the Dowager's opinion on this?"

Lord Changping smiled, "It should be what is Lao Ai's thoughts and opinion on this. Last month, the Dowager suddenly left for Yongdu and before that, she has stopped attending court sessions for more than 10 days. It seems that Lao Ai has become her spokesperson."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly sighing. Of course he knows that Zhu Ji is hiding in Yongdu so that others will not find out she's giving birth to a child of Lao Ai's. He asked quietly, "Did Lao Ai go with her?"

Wang Ling shook his head, "No! He is now in a fierce struggle with Lu Buwei, how can he leave so easily?"

Looking at their expressions, he knew that they are having suspicions about Zhu Ji's sudden departure from Xianyang.

He tested them, "So who do both of you think is suitable to

be the Crown Princess?"

Wang Ling replied, "Meixiu, the granddaughter of Wang Chi. She's just turned 15, very pretty, virtuous and knowledgeable. No one else is more suited than her to be the Crown Princess."

Xiang Shaolong agreed, "If that is the case, she is indeed very ideal. But it's best that you make arrangements for the Crown Prince to meet her. If he's happy with the choice, it's easier for us to talk. The only worry now is that the Dowager will disagree."

Lord Changping said, "This is precisely the reason why we've come to look for you. We've tried to ask the Dowager about this on many occasions, and before the Dowager left the city, she once told the Crown Prince that if she's not around, Xiang Shaolong can make decisions on her behalf on all matters."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Really!"

Wang Ling said, "The Crown Prince said it himself. The Dowager even told him that she trusts Shaolong's eyes and knowledge the most."

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened. He knows that Lao Ai must have someone else in mind and Zhu Ji can't twist him around and knowing that if Lao Ai gets his way, her relationship with Xiao Pan will worsen so she's pushing this problem to him.

In view of the current situation, even Lao Ai would have no

choice but to give some face to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong said happily, "Then we'll proceed with your wishes. Hey, are you going to send me back to Xianyang under escort?"

The both of them smiled on hearing that.

Lord Changping suddenly changed the topic, "Lord Xinling and King Anli died within two days of each other. The Crown Prince has ascended the throne as King of Wei and the Queen is Dan Meimei."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly shocked, Although he and Lord Xinling were enemies, but he was still saddened on hearing news of his death. Henceforth the lives of Lady Pingyuan and Lord Shaoyuan will surely be difficult.

Wang Ling continued, "Lian Po has indeed escaped back to Chu. Accordingly it was Lord Longyang who let him off, otherwise I'm afraid he'd have become the burial accompaniment of Master Wuji."

Xiang Shaolong tried his best not to think about things beyond his control and asked, "Has Lu Buwei been up to anything lately?"

Lord Changping sighed, "Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are having minor quarrels every other day and big fights every other week. Meng Ao is leading troops to attack Han and has taken down 15 cities in a row, his reputation is growing rapidly. The Yans and the Zhaos have started fighting again. The Zhaos are using Li Mu as their commander, and how can the

Yans be his match. The cities of Wusui and Fangcheng have all been taken by Li Mu. Luckily the King of Zhao was afraid of Li Mu getting stronger and have ordered him to halt his troops, otherwise maybe he'll have attached the capital of Yan by now."

Xiang Shaolong thought of Prince Dan and was feeling perplexed as he asked, "Qi and Yan are not fighting, instead it's Zhao and Yan fighting. What is going on?"

Wang Ling said, "We're not sure either, seems like it's still a fight over land. Ever since the Yans joined Chu to target Qi, they're now thinking of getting back the land that was taken over by the Zhaos, thus the fights."

Lord Changping added, "Now Meng Ao is busy making preparations to attack Wei with Lu Buwei's support. We objected strongly because this matter will sooner or later lead to another joining of the five states. But Meng Ao is away and Lu Buwei strongly argues that if we do not continue with our military efforts, it'll be difficult for us to maintain our strong advantage and protect the Three Eastern Commandery<sup>20</sup>. It wasn't easy for us to argue against him because ever since Han and Wei allied themselves together, they're indeed tempted to move and are up to no good. Wang Chi is now at the border of Zhao to keep the Zhaos in check."

Lord Changping continued, "The Crown Prince once mentioned that he hopes Shaolong will be able to lead the

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<sup>20</sup> Three Eastern Commandery is in modern day Shannxi



army, to stop Meng Ao's reputation and power from growing stronger day by day, which will make it even for difficult for us to move Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, "Let's please settle the matter of the Crown Prince's marriage! Have Du Bi and Pu Hu been up to anything lately?"

Wang Ling replied, "They're still trying to expand their power. Cheng Qian gave the excuse that he has to deal with border security to keep on recruiting soldiers and with the financial backing of Pu Hu, sooner or later there'll be trouble. Now the battles in the east are increasing and no one has the time to bother with them."

Xiang Shaolong signed, "Let's drink! These matters will be settled sooner or later, I'll go back with you to Xianyang tomorrow."

The two of them were ecstatic.

Three months later, Zhu Ji returned to Xianyang from Yongdu and she really accepted Xiang Shaolong's suggestion to disregard Lu Buwei's objections and let Xiao Pan appoint Wang Chi's granddaughter Wang Meixiu as the Crown Princess and at the same time held the wedding.

The next year, Meng Ao, under the support of Wang Qian and Yang Rui, launched major attacks on Wei and took over over 20 cities like Suanzao, Yan, Xu, Yaoren, Yongqiu, Shanyang etc, aside from the Eastern Commandery. This makes one more commandery from the original Three Eastern Commandery.

At the same time the King of Yan sent his able general Ju Xin to attack Zhao but was killed by the Zhao general Pang Nuan.

Just as the Zhaos were about to attack Yan, they heard that the Weis were badly defeated by the Qin army and were so shocked and frightened that they made peace with the Yans.

At this time, the Qis were tempted to move. Pang Nuan saw that the situation was amiss and was worried that he'll be sandwiched between enemies so he took it upon himself to travel to the various states and once again resulted in the coalition of the five states Zhao, Chu, Wei, Yan and Han and launched a major attack in Wei, greatly defeating Meng Ao. Whereas Li Mu, the famed general whose reputation far precedes him had his troops countering Wang Chi so that he was unable to go and give reinforcements. The military updates came so fast and furious that the Qin court was shaken.

After Xiao Pan received the reports he immediately sent men to summon Xiang Shaolong back to Xian Yang and suddenly, Xiang Shaolong's idyllic days which he has enjoyed for quite some time came to an end.

Ji Yanran knows that he won't be able to escape from leading the army this time and insisted on returning to Xianyang with him, hoping to spend a little more time with him.

They've just entered the city gates when they bumped into Guan Zhongxie, who was back on duty after a long period of recuperation.

Although he has lost weight, he is still as energetic as before, his health totally recovered. What is even more rare is that he was still able to smile upon seeing Xiang Shaolong as he said calmly, "I have been ordered to wait here to welcome Grand General, would Grand general please enter the Palace immediately to see his Highness."

Then he lowered his voice and added, "That blade from Grand General has taught me many things which I never knew in the past!"

Xiang Shaolong was very tempted to ask him 'For example?', but he ultimately held himself back. After instructing his wives and child to return to the Wu residence, he rode towards the Palace with Guan Zhongxie.

The atmosphere in Xianyang was obviously tense as the passers-by moved hurriedly on their way. Soldiers on patrol and troops moving military supplies could be seen everywhere. The atmosphere feels as if there's an impending storm.

To the Qins, they have never forgotten the previous defeat under the coalition of the five states previously and now it seems that another defeat is coming so naturally they were all feeling alarmed as they talked about it.

Guan Zhongxie said, "I'll be marrying Third Missy next month, I'm afraid Grand General would not be able to attend my wedding feast."

Xiang Shaolong answered with a wry smile, "I hope I'll be able to come back alive to attend Lord Guan and Third

Missy's wedding feast!"

A sarcastic look flashed past Guan Zhongxie's eyes as he just smiled without saying anything.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly feeling hateful but there was nothing he can do to him.

Everyone knows that in this face off with the approaching coalition army, the outcome is almost a complete loss and they'll just be defeated. He can start counting his lucky stars if he even manages to keep the enemy at bay. The worst thing is that Meng Ao has just been badly defeated by the coalition army and morale is low, and now he's going to take over the reins. One can imagine the difficulty.

The two of them spoke no further and went straight to the Palace.

Xiao Pan was waiting alone at the study for him.

This future Emperor Qin is 18 years old in name, and he can be formally appointed as King in another three years. He was strong and well built and on seeing Xiang Shaolong coming, left his seat eagerly to clasp his hands tightly. After sending the servants away, he pulled him aside to sit down and said seriously, "Teacher, save me!"

Xiang Shaolong was startled, "It's not that serious!"

Xiao Pan smiled wryly, "The situation is extremely dire. The coalition army was gathered outside Hangu Pass, and has won seven out of seven battles, greatly defeating Meng Ao. Now we've lost Hangu Pass. The worst is Wang Chi kept

losing advantage to Li Mu at the Zhao border and now he's only able to try to defend. If teacher can't push the coalition army back this time, Great Qin will be in peril!"

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt that Xiao Pan has turned into that playful child from the Zhao Palace six years ago and a strong feeling surged in him and very naturally he used a famous quote of Zhuge Liang from Chu Shi Biao<sup>21</sup>, "I will give my all to the country until my dying breath!"

Xiao Pan was taken aback, "Please don't ever mention the word 'die', only Teacher is capable of turning the tides now."

At this point in time, the servant came to announce that the dowager and the various officials have already gathered at the inner courtroom to await his arrival. The two of them hurriedly left the study and went to the inner courtroom.

Besides Zhu Ji, those who were present included Lu Buwei, Feng Qie, Lord Changwen, Wang Ling, Li Si, Wang Guan, Cai Ze, Lord Yunyang (Ying Zuo) and Lord Yiliang (Ying Lou). The latter two in recent years have been governing their own areas and this time they actually came back to Xianyang together so one can image how dangerous the situation is now.

On seeing Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji's beautiful eyes brightened immediately. She's put on a little weight but still very alluring.

When Lu Buwei saw Xiang Shaolong, he looked relieved on

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<sup>21</sup> Chu Shi Biao – Documents submitted by Zhuge Liang to Emperor Liu Shan  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chu\\_Shi\\_Biao](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chu_Shi_Biao))

the surface but Xiang Shaolong can feel very clearly that he's secretly gloating over his misfortune.

After they paid their respects, Lord Yiliang, Ying Lou reported, "The army strength for the coalition army this time is as follows, Zhao army 80,000, Chu army 150,000, Wei army 120,000, Yan army 50,000, Han army 100,000, which brings it to a total of 500,000. After the defeated Hangu Pass, they have not moved but have set up defenses while waiting for reinforcements and supplies. General Meng has now retreated to about 200 miles away to set up defenses along the river. If he lose the defense again, our enemy will be able to come straight at us and if they use the water route, they will be able to reach Xianyang in 20 days."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize the severity of the situation.

Lord Changping continued, "Now we're moving our soldiers from all the other areas and have gathered 150,000 and in addition to the 120,000 men in General Meng's hands, we have a total of 270,000 men. This is only enough to defend but the number is far from being able to fight the enemy back."

Xiao Pan furrowed his brows, "Is there no other way to gather more men?"

Wang Ling reported, "Our enemy made careful plans. The Zhaos and the Chus will separately counter General Wang and General An so that they will find difficulty in splitting their forces to reinforce us. I've thought of all ways and

means before I managed to gather this amount of soldiers and many amongst them are actually the old and weak soldiers and new recruits who have yet to complete training.”

On hearing this, Xiang Shaolong took a deep intake of cold breath, secretly thinking, with Meng Ao’s defeated army plus this batch of new and old soldiers, is there still a need to fight this battle?

Zhu Ji said, “What’s General Xiang’s opinion on this situation?”

Xiang Shaolong gave no answer but asked instead, “I wonder if the coalition army has appointed a grand commander?”

Lu Buwei answered gravely, “The information we have on the coalition army is very little and even their military strength is just an estimation on our part. From the situation it should seem that the Zhao general Pang Nuan should be the commander. This person is well versed in military tactics and in fact other than Li Mu, he is Great Qin’s greatest threat. On top of that, they’ve prepared for this for a long time and have also learnt the lesson from their defeat the last time so it’ll be impossible for us to use the same trick to force them to retreat again. Everything now will have to depend on Shaolong.”

Just as Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting, he suddenly remembered that if this battle is lost, the enemy will surely attack Xianyang. But this event has never happened in history before, so wouldn’t it mean that this battle is a sure

win. Once he thought of this, his confidence soared.

Ultimately, the person he fears most is Li Mu. As for Pang Nuan, although he has no fear of him, he cannot think too lightly of him as well.

And thinking on a deeper level, since fate has decided that it's impossible this battle will be lost to a point that Xianyang will be invaded, he can just go all out and do his job.

He came from the Special Task Force and knows a little about military tactics and to use crack troops to counter normal troops. If he follows his usual pattern, maybe there's a slight chance of victory.

Once he thought of this, his heroic spirit rose as he chortled, "I already have a plan, but I wonder who the military commanders of the various states are?"

Everyone saw that he seemed to have changed into another person suddenly and were all feeling surprised.

Xiao Pan answered, "For the Zhaos it's Pang Nuan and Sima Shang, for the Chus it's Wu Zhan, for the Weis it's the up and coming general Sheng Nian, for the Yans and Hans it's Xu Yize and Han Chuang respectively."

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Other than Pang Nuan, Sima Shang and Sheng Nian, the rest are all familiar people."

Luckily Lord Longyang is not in there.

In this era, your best friend can at any time become the enemy who will kill you.



Lu Buwei has not recovered from his shock and asked in disbelief, "Shaolong seems confident but you must know that our enemy is strong and even with General Meng's capabilities, he was defeated in a few continuous battles. Shaolong must not take our enemies lightly."

Feng Qie added, "This Pang Nuan has been really showing off recently, greatly defeating the Yan army and killing the famed general of Yan, Ju Xin. He's someone we must not take lightly of."

Lord Yunyang, Ying Zuo asked, "So what plan does General Xiang really have for defeating our enemy?"

From his tone, he definitely doesn't seem to believe in Xiang Shaolong.

Actually even people like Lord Changping, Li Si and Wang Ling, who have always had utmost confidence in Xiang Shaolong, were worried for him. The Qins may be invincible, but they're now terrified by the constant battles with the coalition army.

Xiang Shaolong happened to glance towards Zhu Ji and it so happens that she was staring at him at the same time. Their eyes met and both of them quickly averted their eyes at the same time.

Lao Ai saw all this and his expression immediately became awkward as he interrupted, "Lord Xiang has never really tried leading a formal army into battle. If you're too careless, I'm afraid the result will be defeat."

Just listening to the way he talked, calm and full of himself, one immediately knows that his power has increased greatly and his confidence is soaring.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking, when I was training in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who knows where you have been reincarnated to so who are you to criticize me. But of course on the surface he pretended to be humble and said, “To defeat the enemy is indeed more difficult than ascending to Heaven, but to force the enemy to retreat is really no problem.”

Everyone was surprised.

Zhu Ji asked, “If we do not defeat the enemy, then how do we make them retreat?”

Xiang Shaolong replied casually, “The key point lies with Tian Dan. Now that the strength of the 5 states are greatly boosted, he will naturally not dare to make rash moves but if the 5 states lose their advantage, he’ll definitely make use of the opportunity to invade Yan and Zhao. By then Yan and Zhao will surely be forced to retreat their soldiers and the coalition army will be disintegrated. Minister Lu is most familiar with this matter, why don’t we let him explain.”

Lu Buwei is aware that he is being subtly sarcastic about Tian Dan being in cahoots with him and was feeling a wave of hatred but he can only pretend to smile and reply, “Shaolong’s words are not without reason.”

Cai Ze said, “General still have not told us the plan to put the coalition army at a disadvantage!”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting ‘as if I know’, but on the surface he showed confidence as he replied, “Winning and losing in battle, is not something that can be easily explained with words. Otherwise, Zhao Gua who was so brilliant at military theories won’t end up with the defeat at Changping. But if your Highness will allow me to become the Grand Commander, you must first accede to my three requests, otherwise this battle will be a definite defeat.”

Not waiting for Xiao Pan to speak, Zhu Ji gladly asked, “Shaolong please speak your mind.”

The look of jealousy in Lao Ai’s eyes intensified.

A baddie will always be a baddie. In such a situation where the country should be placed above self, and when Xiang Shaolong is his great benefactor, he is still concerned about his own personal gains.

Xiang Shaolong’s aura boomed as he said seriously, “Firstly is the question of generals and soldiers. I want Teng Yi and Huan Qi to be my Left and Right Deputy Generals and at the same time I want 10,000 and 20,000 elite riders from the Calvary and Reinforcement troops respectively. As for the 150,000 men already gathered, I want to pick out only the good ones and reduce the numbers to 70,000. With this total of 100,000, it’ll be enough to break the enemy.”

Everyone did not expect that he’ll ask to reduce the number of troops and were all taken aback.

Lao Ai was just waiting for the chance to belittle him in front of Zhu Ji so he asked with his brows drawn together, “Our

enemy's army is vast, the number of 500,000 we got is just an initial estimation. For all we know they are still increasing their men as we speak and now that Shaolong wants to reduce our troops to 100,000 and even if we add up General Meng's 120,000 men, it's still not even half of our enemy troops. How can this battle be fought?"

Lu Buwei nodded his head, "Minister Lao's words are reasonable, Shaolong you must reconsider."

A sudden ridiculous thought welled up in Xiang Shaolong's mind. Before his holiday, Lu and Lao were fighting constantly with each other and why is it now they seem to suddenly share the same opinions?

Xiao Pan's confidence in Xiang Shaolong is almost to the point of blind loyalty and he said, "The Great general must have his reasons, but can you please explain a little."

Xiang Shaolong replied unhurriedly, "A good army lies in quality and not quantity. The coalition army may have lots of men but ultimately the various armies are not used to working together and they will certainly face multiple problems in directing and cooperation. Therefore I plan to focus on this point, to reduce our men to only the elite as not only will it increase our effectiveness, it will also boost our morale. Besides, in military maneuvers what is important is being unpredictable and resorting to tricks to win. If there are too many men, it would mean the quality of the troops will be lowered and I won't be able to manage them effectively and will instead end up in defeat."

Lord Changping and Wang Ling were the first to express their agreement and once these two important military men have nodded their heads, how can the others say anything else.

Li Si asked, "As for General Meng's 120,000 men, will Great General be reorganizing them?"

Xiang Shaolong said with all certainty, "Of course. But I want to inspect their condition personally before I make any decisions."

The confidence Zhu Ji has in Xiang Shaolong is only slightly below that of Xiao Pan and she said with joy, "Shaolong's first request has been approved, I wonder what's your second request?"

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "The second request is General Meng must be summoned back to Xianyang and I must be given total authority to lead this battle, otherwise this battle will surely be a total loss even before we begin the fight."

This time even Wang Ling and Lord Changping turned to look at each other.

It must be explained that even though Meng Ao lost repeatedly but he has never lost to the point of utter destruction and that in itself is considered a feat. Besides, his experience in leading troops far exceeds Xiang Shaolong so with him at the frontline helping, even if Xiang Shaolong loses, at least it won't end up with the enemies coming straight at them. That's why no one dare to give their agreement so readily.

A look of anger appeared on Lu Buwei's face and as he was about to speak, Xiao Pan answered coldly, "Great General's words are reasonable, an army cannot have two commanders. I totally agree."

Lu Buwei hurriedly interjected, "I think it's best to allow General Meng to retreat to the second line of defense as a precaution."

Wang Guan, Lao Ai and Cai Ze all expressed their agreement to this suggestion.

Xiang Shaolong gave a small smile, "From Hangu all the way to Xianyang, it's all the front line, so where's the second line you speak of. Only if you give me free rein to execute tactics that our enemy will never think of will I be able to force them to retreat with less men than them."

Zhu Ji asked, "What exactly does Shaolong have in mind to force them to retreat?"

Xiang Shaolong replied respectfully, "This is where my third request comes in. It's stated in military books that when the general is fighting outside, they can carry out their plans first without seeking the ruler's permission. So I boldly seek the trust of the Dowager, Crown Prince and Minister Lu to ignore any rumors you may hear. Because in this mission I will appear to lose first before winning, and the situation will be that the enemies be allowed to advance first before losing badly. So at the beginning of the battle, please do not lose hope in me because of a few minor losses. As for my plan to deal with the enemy, please allow me to keep it a

secret for now because if the plan is leaked, it will not work.”

Xiao Pan slapped the table and sighed, “Great General is indeed an extraordinary man, you’ve considered all details and aspects of the situation before you even moved your army. I will prepare the rites to pray for your victory two days later. The rise and fall of our Great Qin will be in Great General’s hands.”

Just these few words and the heavy burden of directing the biggest battle fell on Xiang Shaolong’s shoulders.

After the emergency meeting ended, Xiang Shaolong had another small discussion with Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei and Lord Changping to discuss the details of the war like food, supplies, reinforcements etc. Only after it was decided that Wu Guo will be in charge of supplies that Xiang Shaolong was able to extricate himself.

He had just left the Palace gates when Lao Ai ran after him from behind and after a round of pleasantries, Lao Ai rode together with him and pretended to be apologetic, “I was just stating the facts earlier, Shaolong please do not take it to heart.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing him but instead said, “Brother Lao, you think too lowly of me. How can this be considered anything?”

Lao Ai sighed, “But there is one matter which I really blame Shaolong.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “What matter?”

Lao Ai asked with a wry smile, "Why did Shaolong send Meimei to Daliang? At least you should have informed me."

Xiang Shaolong replied him with an equally wry smile, "Because I was afraid Brother Lao will object. At that time it was obvious Brother Lao will lose to Lu Buwei so instead of benefiting that thief, might as well let Meimei go to where she wants to go. Brother Lao still wants to blame me?"

Lao Ai was silent for a moment before he nodded his head, "I find it difficult to accept Shaolong's honesty but I have no choice but to accept it. Hai, I really did not expect that now that my power has increased greatly, I cannot have the girl I love instead. Lose one, gain one, it is indeed distressing."

Xiang Shaolong understood that he's secretly hinting that he has to live according to Zhu Ji's whims and fancies and for the first time can understand how he feels.

No matter how despicable Lao Ai is, he is still a human, with his inner feelings and sincerity.

There are just too many things in life that one is helpless about.

For example the enemies he is facing, many of them are good friends whom he once chatted and drank with.

And the closest among them is non other than Han Chuang.

If he's really forced to kill him, what would his own feelings be?



## CHAPTER 4

## Reconnaissance Satellite

[Translated by JEAN]

ONCE he went back to the official residence and found Teng Yi, he asked him to send men to summon Huan Qi back to Xianyang urgently for a discussion.

Unexpectedly Jing Jun had arrived on hearing the news and after knowing that he's not included in the mission, he refused to budge. No matter how Xiang and Teng coaxed or coerced, for example saying the he's just got married and should not go to war, or that they need him in the capital city to lead the cavalry, he refused to listen.

In the end they had to give in and Xiang Shaolong entered the palace again to see Xiao Pan to ask him to appoint Jing Jun as another Deputy General while Lord Changping will look after the cavalry in his absence, with Zhao Da taking over as the temporary Deputy Commander before they could settle this matter.

Next he went to the army camp outside the city to choose his elite soldiers. The old and the weak were all sent home while the new recruits were left with Meng Wu and Meng Tian for training.

Huan Qi hurried back that night and the three brothers, together with Huan Qi and Wu Guo opened up the map and spent the whole night discussing the battle details.

In the morning, all of them took a quick nap before they all set out for their respective tasks.

Xiang Shaolong entered the palace again to have a meeting with Xiao Pan and other than Lord Changping and Lu Buwei, there were also Wang Ling, Lao Ai and the Dowager Zhu Ji.

Although Lu Buwei would very much like to kill Xiang Shaolong, but for his own benefit, he definitely does not want Xiang Shaolong to lose this key battle on which the Qin Empire is hinged on. That's why he portrayed himself to be very cooperative.

Only now did realize how wealthy and strong Qin is, for there're no problems in the supply of food, weapons, horses or carriages at all. They were able to give him whatever amount he asked for.

After the meeting, Lu Buwei, Zhu Ji and Lao Ai left and Xiang Shaolong turned towards Xiao Pan, Lord Changping and Wang Ling and said, "Now the enemy is making quick battles and with the 5 states having a unified goal, their morale is high. If I just go out and fight the enemy like that, defeat is a certainty. The only way is to let the enemy become overconfident, then lure them in and at the same time disrupt their food supplies by moving away all the people in the towns along the way away. Make them lengthen their supply line indefinitely, far away from their base camp, then make use of the dangers in the mountains and forest for our elite soldiers to launch a surprise attack. If we gain the upper hand, we'll chase them down hard but if we can't fight them we can retreat first. This is a good opportunity to destroy their morale and when the time is ripe, we will launch an attack on the enemy and in this battle, we'll have about 90% chance of winning."

The eyes of the three of them brightened at the same time.

Xiang Shaolong said, "Amongst our enemy's lead generals, most of them are people who knows me well and is aware that I've always been courageous and fears no death. Once they hear that I'm leading the army, they'll certainly think that I'll go for an immediate and swift battle. I'll grant them their wishes, and will retreat after a minor loss and pretend to set up camp to hold the defense. By now it's almost the end of summer and autumn and winter will be arriving soon. Our enemy would not want to miss this chance and will surely launch a massive attack before winter, hoping to at

least move slowly closer to Xianyang by taking down the towns and cities on the outskirts. I will set up everything at Zui Cheng and wait for them to attack before winter arrives. If we can just win one battle, they will surely be worried that the snow will pile up on the roads and hence they will be cut off from their supply chain. They will certainly retreat immediately and that is the time for us to give chase.”

Wang Ling sighed, “No wonder before his death, Lu Gong kept praising Shaolong as an intelligent and brave warrior ever since Bai Qi. Just listening to the military tactics that Shaolong has just said and I know that your knowledge in military strategies are as good as your skills with the sword; knowing yourself and your enemy, and a hundred battles fought is a hundred battles won.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, “More easily said than done. The actual implementation will have to be done carefully and there must be no mistakes. Luckily the Grand Commander of the coalition army is not Li Mu, otherwise he’ll definitely not fall for this trick.”

Xiao Pan said with relief and joy, “Even if Grand Tutor is up against Li Mu, I think both of you are on equal standing. Hai! I can finally have a good sleep tonight.”

Lord Changping added, “Once Shaolong comes back victorious, I will definitely hold a feast of at least 10 tables at Drunken Wind Loft to help you celebrate.”

After a round of chat and laughter, Xiang Shaolong returned to his official residence and was surprised to see Xiang

Bao'er playing with his men at the square. His beloved wives and maids have all come back from the farm and even the long absent Zhou Liang was there and on seeing him, immediately knelt down and cried out, "Zhou Liang was lucky that I have not failed your order and have brought the King Eagle back."

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic, "Where is the King Eagle?"

Zhou Liang stood up, puckered his lips and whistled melodiously.

The sound of the wind being sliced could be heard from above the sky.

Xiang Shaolong was started and lifted his head up for a look, only to see a grayish-black hunting eagle with a wingspan of about 5 feet soaring down and landing delicately on Zhou Liang's shoulder, its bright and intimidating eyes coldly inspecting the people and things around it.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep gasp and asked, "Doesn't this King Eagle need a leg chain or have its eyes and head covered by a bag?"

Zhou Liang replied, "Of course not, otherwise how can it be considered the King of eagles. I took a whole year to find it and spent another two years training it day and night before I dared to bring it back to see Master Xiang. I just heard that Master Xiang will be leading troops to Hangu the day after and I am willing to follow you and let King Eagle help Master Xiang spy on the enemy troops. I guarantee it will make great contributions.

Wu Tingfang came up next to Xiang Shaolong while pulling Zhou Wei along with her and said with a smile, "This King Eagle seems to be quite spiritual, like it's able to communicate with Zhou Liang. No matter where we tried to hide earlier, this super eagle could find us easily. Even when we were hiding in the house, it can look in from outside the window. It was most fun."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking that is almost akin to obtaining a reconnaissance satellite, spying on the enemy from high above the sky. He laughed and said, "Since we have the King Eagle helping us, this battle is a sure win."

Zhou Liang gave a shout and the King Eagle spread its wings and soared towards the sky and in an instant became just a small speck in the sky.

The King Eagle was circling in the clear sky and below it, in the wilderness, is the never ending line of the great army of Qin.

Qin's military is mainly split into the army and navy, and in terms of expansion and importance, the latter is always lagging behind the former because of actual demand.

The army is further separated into chariots, cavalry and foot soldiers.

By the time of the Warring States period, the use of chariots has been greatly reduced and weakened as compared to the Spring-Autumn period but in some situations, especially battles on flat ground, there's still a use for them. For example, to charge into the enemy's formation to disrupt

their formation or maybe to be turned into mobile barrier to stop the approach of enemy troops.

But Xiang Shaolong is looking at the mostly mountainous terrain from Hangu to Xianyang and on top of that, he's not very familiar with the deployment of chariots so in this mission, he decided not to use them at all. The cavalry and foot soldiers will be the main force.

Ever since Xiang Shaolong's Hundred Battles Sword was forged, Xiao Pan gave orders for it to be replicated in volume and with Uncle Qing personally supervising the workers, they made a batch of thick, long swords. Although it can never be compared the Hundred Battles Sword which was forged with chrome added in it but the replicates is enough to greatly improve the cutting and slashing ability of the cavalry for when they charge into battles. This is the first time that it will actually be used.

Amongst the 100,000 men going to battle, the cavalry took up about 30,000 and they were from the mounted troops and reinforcement forces and on top of that there were 1,000 elite family warriors from the Wu family. These are the main attack forces for Xiang Shaolong.

The foot soldiers are split into light infantry and heavy infantry. They are all formal soldiers who underwent strict training in the various counties.

The light infantry will not wear armor and uses weapons like bows and crossbows and in battles they will usually be lined in the first rows specifically to kill enemies from a distance.

The heavy infantry will wear copper armors and uses pole weapons like spears, halberds etc for close combat with the enemy.

In Xiang Shaolong's expeditionary forces, the light infantry takes up 30,000 men and the heavy infantry has 40,000 men.

In this era, the success and failure of a battle, besides the implement of strategies, it's how the commanders can fully make use of the various types of troops to his disposal and the coordination between them.

As for the organization of the troops, they use the Buqu policy, where 5 men makes a fireteam, 50 men makes a section and so on, until 5,000 men will make a brigade and 5 brigades will make a corp. So one corp will consist of 25,000 men and Xiang Shaolong's army strength is 4 corps.

According the Qin regulations, the various ranks of generals are allowed to have their own army and usually will be about 10% of the total army strength, like now Xiang Shaolong will be able to increase his personal army from the current 3,000 to 10,000.

Because of the constant battles, even if Commanding Generals like Meng Ao and Wang Chi return the troops to the imperial court, their own personal army will not be dismissed and their secondary duty will be to protect the safety of the generals. That's why Meng Ao was able to direct his men to attack the farm in the past.

So once one becomes the Commanding General, not only is his status improved, the power he holds will be greatly



increased as well.

Xiang Shaolong's military knowledge comes mainly from the 21st century and although he has studied the Mohist military stratagems, he did not stick to the rules and split up the various different military units. He will leave together with Jing Jun, Teng Yi and the cavalry, Huan Qi will follow behind with the infantry and lastly will be Wu Guo leading the field train.

Because he has already decided to lure the enemy in, Huan Qi and Wu Guo's main forces will stay behind once they reach Zuicheng to strengthen the defenses and plant traps. At the same time Huan Qi will train his men to be familiar with the terrain. This will spare them the agony of long travel and they can disperse the people from the nearby villages as well and let them retreat to the safer and bigger cities behind like Gaoling and Zhiyang.

Moving the troops is a very important aspect in wars and luckily the route to the frontline is the safe official paths within Qin borders. On top of that, they had the Eagle King recce for them so they could travel quickly on the straight and flat roads.

Five days later, Xiang Shaolong's cavalry went pass Zuicheng, with the mountainous regions like Mount Li, Mount Zhu etc on the right, with Mount Hua right ahead of them. The terrain started getting uneven.

In order to preserve his troop's strength and morale, Xiang Shaolong chose to set off early every morning, and set up

camp after noon so the soldiers don't find the journey tiring at all.

After travelling east from Zuicheng for another ten days, they finally arrived at Mount Hua.

If they're travelling for leisure, the route along the way is indeed scenic.

Besides with the hot summer now, the green trees seems to be fighting for glory and with the wild flowers in full bloom, the scenery is beautiful.

A pity that no one is in the mood to enjoy them now. On this dangerous mountainous terrain with ravines aplenty, sometimes there're cliffs on one side of the path and on the other side there are deep abyss on the other side with the raging waters from River De rushing below them. They had to walk carefully to avoid making any missteps.

Zhou Liang became Xiang Shaolong's personal follower.

From time to time, the Eagle King will fly back to land on his shoulder and the closeness between man and beast made Xiang Shaolong envious.

Now he finally understands why it's easy for the Qins to attack the six states but for the six states to attack Qin, it's as difficult as ascending Heaven. What Qin has is the dangerous terrain under them, and this time he was able to come up with this trick precisely because of this dangerous terrain.

The five states are actually in the midst of war and are suspicious of each other. But because the threat from Qin is

too great, that's why they put aside their own wars for now and joined forces to attack Qin. Such a union will never last for long.

So if he is Pang Nuan, and weather permitting, he will attack Xianyang directly as soon as the opportunity presents itself, so that things will not drag out too long and they end up disintegrating before any fight happens.

So he is not worried that Pang Nuan will not fall for the trick.

After travelling for five days on the mountainous roads, they came to an area where the ground is relatively flat and on the vast plains where flowers bloom, they met Meng Ao and his troops who had been summoned back to the capital.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Meng Ao underwent a simple ceremony to exchange the army tokens and official documents in the commander's tent.

Meng Ao has aged visibly from the last time they saw him, his face lined with harshness, his hair turned from black to white. His behavior was polite yet distant.

He went to great lengths to explain in detail the situation at the frontline and he does not sound optimistic at all.

In the end, he concluded, "That fellow Pang Nuan is indeed the famed military strategist of the east. Now he has set up camp at Hangu, obviously he's waiting for our reinforcements to arrive before he defeat us in one fell swoop, after which he will make a beeline for Xianyang. Now that I see Shaolong only has the cavalry with you, I can tell

that you've seen through Pang Nuan's intentions and won't be meeting him head on. I am indeed glad to see this."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly impressed, he's indeed a famed general to be able to see through his own intentions with just one look. He just smiled but gave no reply.

Meng Ao suddenly gave a sigh and asked quietly, "Can I have a few words in private with Shaolong."

Teng Yi and the rest are all understanding people and they hurriedly left the tent.

Meng Ao looked up at the top of the tent, looking like he does not know where to start. After a long pause, he gave another sigh and said, "I, Meng Ao, have never lowered myself down to beg others so I've never been well-liked by the Qins. Only when Minister Lu started giving me opportunities did I have the chance to express my abilities and sweep through the battlefields, expanding my troops north and south and establishing a meritorious career."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in agreement, "Everyone have their own experience and stand, this I understand."

Meng Ao stopped looking upwards and instead turned his eyes to stare deeply at him, "I only have two sons and Shaolong had saved them once. I hope that Shaolong will not abandon them in future, naturally I will give something back in return."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, knowing that Meng Ao has seen through that Meng Wu and Meng Tian has allied

themselves with him.

Meng Ao said with a wry smile, "Ultimately Lu Buwei will not win you. This time Pang Nuan will not be able to gain any advantage, but Shaolong must be careful of Li Mu. This person is a rare talent in military affairs, never losing a single battle. Even after what happened at Changping, we still dare not talk lightly of attacking Zhao because of the presence of this person. If Shaolong manage to win this round of battle, his Highness will certainly give you the important task of attacking Zhao. When you meet this person, you have to be extra careful."

Xiang Shaolong could feel the scalp on his head going numb on hearing this. Wang Chi had told him this, and now Meng Ao is saying the same thing. Once he returns to Xianyang he must get Xiao Pan to summon Wang Jian back immediately so that he won't have to face this man, who deserves the respect of everyone, in the battlefield.

Meng Ao gave another sigh before he stood up and took his leave.

The next day they broke camp and set off. When they arrived at the connecting hills where the Qin army had retreated about 50 miles back and was holding fortress, Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to set up camp and defenses, cutting off the only route towards the west.

By now the defending general at the front line Cheng Jun heard of their arrival and hurried over to pay respects to his newly appointed superior.

While everyone was standing on a hilltop looking at the situation, Cheng Jun gave his report.

Xiang Shaolong said, "If my estimation is correct, the coalition army will launch a fierce attack once we arrive and try their best to destroy our defenses to break our men's morale. So you must retreat in batches over the next few nights."

Cheng Jun was taken aback, "You mustn't do this, if my troops retreat last, and because of the low morale of the men, no one will be willing to stay behind and wait for death. If our enemy intensifies their attack, we'll disintegrate without even a fight. Besides, if our enemy catches up swiftly with their cavalry, we run the risk of the entire army being killed."

Xiang Shaolong said with a laugh, "What General Cheng said is right, but that is precisely what I want them to think, that we are inexperienced and will commit this fatal mistake. The biggest problem is to make a neat retreat without any losses."

Cheng Jun has yet to recover from his shock when Teng Yi added, "The first batch to retreat will be the injured, sick, old and weak soldiers and at the same time announce to them that reinforcements have arrived. We have to exaggerate the numbers to 300,000 men, with Wang Jian and our Great General Xiang leading the troops. Only then will the men be pacified and won't result in chaos."

Cheng Jun was dumbfounded on hearing that.

Even though there will always be deceit in battles, but the ones being deceived are always the enemy. To lie to their own people is indeed a rare instance but he has no choice but to admit that this is a marvelous way of settling the minds of the troops.

Xiang Shaolong is a legendary hero well known in every family in Qin and although he has yet to make meritorious military contributions, he is the idol of the Qin army, his reputation far precedes him. As for Wang Jian, his military accomplishments are aplenty and his fame has spread far and wide. If these two famed great generals have joined forces to lead the reinforcement troops, morale will be greatly boosted.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "General Teng and I will accompany General Cheng and sneak back to camp once night falls to arrange everything. General Cheng and your man can rest for a while and gather your strength so that you can work better later."

Cheng Jun finally understood and left gladly.

Xiang Shaolong, together with Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Zhou Liang, the 18 warriors and the Wu Family Warriors rode out of camp to analyze the nearby terrain and to see what traps they can set up to stop the enemy's cavalry from going after their troops when they are retreating.

They only returned to camp at dusk and after dinner, went back with Cheng Jun to the frontline.

Eagle King flew up into the starry sky to spot the scouts sent

out by their enemy and actually found 8 different scouts, whom they manage to avoid.

On seeing such a marvelous flying scout, Cheng Jun was extremely impressed and his confidence in Xiang Shaolong increased greatly.

The Qin's army camp was set up on the top of a hill, facing the road from the west that will lead to Qin and the back of the hill was a vast plain. About 10 odd miles away, campfires were lit up like the starry sky, the whole plain and hills were filled with their enemy's tents and the sight is indeed numbing.

When Xiang Shaolong arrived, Cheng Jun relayed the information as ordered, that Xiang Shaolong has come first leading the first batch of troops and Great General Wang Jian will be coming soon after. Indeed morale was boosted and everyone were rubbing their hands in glee, getting ready to counterattack.

At this time, Teng Yi and Zhou Liang led a thousand from the Wu family Warriors who are adept with mountainous terrains and night subterfuge to secure the important routes. With the Eagle King's astute eyes, they cleared the area of the enemy scouts who had climbed mountains and crossed forests to get there, to prevent news of them making the troops retreat from leaking.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the hundred odd leaders to his side and after giving them words of encouragement, gave orders for the injured, sick, old and weak to be sent back



immediately. Everyone thought that he was showing concern for his subordinates and happily went ahead to carry out his orders.

By dawn, Xiang Shaolong has already sent away close to 3,000 men, leaving only 12,000 able bodied troops to stand guard at the ditches and forts at the frontline.

Cheng Jun accompanied him on his inspection rounds and after going up the highest point to have a close look, the situation on both the enemy and their sides became extremely clear.

He saw that both the enemy and their own people have set up camps on top of the hills and have made use of the what nature has given in the forests and mountainous terrain to set up effective defenses. Trees were chopped to make barriers to protect against arrows and stones and ditches stretching for miles were dug, and the situation looks like they are all getting ready for a confrontation.

The location that Meng Ao chose to set up camp was very advantageous, with the Yellow River on one side to provide a water barrier and cliffs on the other side where even birds will find difficulty flying in. The terrain for about 5 miles between the river and the cliffs, was filled with lines after lines of barriers and ditches, and on the top of every hill, a solid wooden fortress was built. There were close to a hundred wooden fortresses within sight of each other and in terms of defense, it can be considered flawless. No wonder he could hold the coalition army at bay for three months.

Cheng Jun pointed at the dozen odd ships docked near the enemy camp on the river and said, "That's Wei's ships, who will bring in food, supplies, troops etc and amongst them there are a lot of equipment for breaking sieges. It's extremely disadvantageous to our situation."

Teng Yi asked, "How many large scale attacks have they launched so far?"

Cheng Jun replied, "Only two large scale attacks at the beginning, but we managed to keep them away after much difficulty. There were heavy casualties on both sides."

Xiang Shaolong's eyes swept past a vast, dry landscape that was between them, thinking of the terrible battle that will happen there, and thinking of how his old friends like Han Chuang, Xu Yi etc may very well be on the other side looking at his own side and a mixture of emotions can't help but well up inside.

Teng Yi looked at the endless tents and banners that seems to dot their enemy's camp and heaved a huge sigh, "No wonder General Meng was defeated. Just by looking at our enemy's camp setup, one can tell that the decision maker in our enemy camp is very well versed in military stratagems. Now our enemy's troops are more then five times of ours and if they attack us with fire by day and sneak attacks by night, our defenses will be breached within 10 days. Obviously they are not making any more because they are waiting for our reinforcements to arrive and when we are still tired out from the long journey, they will defeat us in

one fell swoop.”

As Xiang Shaolong was looking up at Eagle King who was circling up in the sky, Cheng Jun pointed out to him how the troops of the five states were distributed and what their banners look like.

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath, cast aside all his troubles and gave his orders, “We should delay no more. The night after we will pretend that the reinforcements have arrived and lure the enemy into attacking us. Put some wood and hay in the camps burn the camp to hinder the enemy’s progress before retreating in batches.”

Teng and Cheng accepted their orders.

## CHAPTER 5

## Luring the Enemy In

[Translated by JEAN]

THE NEXT DAY Teng Yi went back, leaving Jing Jun to stand guard at the base to arrange matters for the 'reinforcement troops'.

Xiang Shaolong patrolled the camp as usual and when he was high above surveying the enemy's camp, he found their inactivity to be almost illogical and queried, "Have they always been like this?"

Cheng Jun replied respectfully, "They only stared becoming this quiet about 10 odd days ago, before that they were

constantly sending troops to disrupt us day and night, but it's usually a small scale attack of 20,000 to 30,000 men."

Xiang Shaolong felt that something is terribly wrong and suddenly had a thought, "If the enemy has reached the opposite bank, can they make a big detour upstream, and then cross the river again to surround us by the back?"

Cheng Jun replied, "General Meng has long thought of this point and deliberately placed fire beacons along the river. Once the enemy is sighted, the beacons will be lighted immediately. Besides, the River De is wide and its water rapid with tall cliffs on both sides of the bank. There're no bridges as well so even if our enemy have such intentions, I'm afraid it'll be extremely difficult to accomplish."

Xiang Shaolong is still worried and instructed Zhou Liang who was standing on his other side, "Send Eagle King to the opposite bank to have a look, it'll be better if he can fly a little further."

Zhou Liang set off gladly to follow up on his order.

Ever since he got Eagle King, Zhou Liang seemed to have changed into another person.

Cheng Jun saw that Xiang Shaolong did not trust his assessment and his expression became a little unnatural.

On seeing that, Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, "General Cheng, please do not take this to heart. In war, anything can be changed and we're never far from these four words 'unexpected tactics brings victory'. For Pang Nuan to enjoy

such reputation, he must be a capable person. That's why I have to be on the alert against any surprise tactics he may have that we will not expect. If my guess is correct, Pang Nuan must have set up temporary floating bridges with thick ropes upstream of where our scouts will find difficulty in reaching. Once they have crossed the difficult river, they'll keep the floating bridges and move up behind us and repeat the same thing with the floating bridges and let their army cross the river swiftly. Ha, no wonder they had to wait for our reinforcements to arrive before they attack!"

Cheng Jun was speechless on hearing this and secretly commented to himself that 'you're the Great General, of course you can say whatever you like.'

Xiang Shaolong pointed at a dense forest on the right near the hills and continued, "If I'm Pang Nuan, I'll order men to hide the chariots and heavy machinery etc in the woods and camouflage them with branches and leaves so when the time comes for them to attack us, the distance needed to move these things will be shortened."

Cheng Jun replied, "I'll take note of that."

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, "Is General Cheng thinking of setting fire to the whole thing?"

Cheng Jun was taken aback, "That dense forest is close to the enemy camp and with ditches and forts everywhere, how can we get near enough to set fire?"

Xiang Shaolong pointed at the tall hills on the left and said, "Climb up that hill and you can throw down the torches, but

it is most important to time the use of this tactic correctly. If it's used when the enemy is attacking, it will cause the greatest effect."

Cheng Jun was astounded and replied, "I understand now."

The both of them discussed the various ways they can block the enemy. Because they have to at least make a show of trying to fend off the attack for a few days before pretending to be defeated and retreat, otherwise no one would believe in their act.

Right at this time Zhou Liang returned with Eagle King and said excitedly, "Great General has indeed predicted correctly. From the area that Eagle King has covered while flying, we can know that our enemy have at least 10,000 men who have snuck up about 15 miles behind us on the opposite bank and getting ready to cross the river for a sneak attack."

Cheng Jun immediately broke out in sweat and said with shame, "I will immediately tighten defenses around that area."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, "Hold on! Won't this be as good as telling them that we've seen through their secret plan?"

He reached out his hand, intending to touch Eagle King but on seeing it turn around with its beak open and ready to attack, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly retracted his hand in fright.

Zhou Liang said apologetically, "I deliberately trained it not to get close to anyone else, I seek Great General's

forgiveness and understanding.”

Cheng Jun was more anxious about the enemy crossing the river and asked with utmost admiration, “So what should I do? If we allow the enemy to get behind us and cut off our paths, followed by a frontal assault, we’ll be in dire situation.”

Xiang Shaolong did not reply him first but said to Zhou Liang instead, “Brother Zhou will be in charge of taking note of our enemy’s activities on the opposite bank. You can rest during the day but once it’s dark, you have to be extra vigilant.”

Zhou Liang asked excitedly, “So should I go back to the tent with Eagle King now and nap?”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Exactly!”

After Zhou Liang left, Xiang Shaolong told Cheng Jun, “General Cheng, you don’t have to worry. Just leave it to me to burn the woods and deal with the enemy troops on the opposite bank. You’ll just have to take good care of our base camp and instruct everyone to take turns and rest during the day so that they will have the energy to deal with our enemy at night.”

Drum beats can be heard from the enemy side.

A few hundred war chariots rushed out, followed by thousands of foot soldiers approached them steadily.

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “The enemy has found out that my reinforcements have arrived so now they’re starting their relentless attacks.”



He turned towards Cheng Jun and added, "Now do you understand why I said they can only take turns to rest."

Cheng Jun replied with total admiration, "I am enlightened."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly finding it comical that he is winning because he has 2000 more years of military knowledge. He just have to randomly choose one or two beautiful tricks from famous ancient wars and he'll be able to make use of them.

He immediately snuck out of camp with the 18 Warriors and rode along the bank upstream.

Just like what Cheng Jun has said, there were tall fire beacons every 10 miles along the way, each about 50 feet high and at the platform on top there was a wooden beam about 30 feet tall with a horizontal board which can be moved up and down the beam so that the soldiers can climb up to look far away. At the edge of every board there was a large cage stuffed with hay. If they see traces of the enemy, it will give out smoke during the day and fire during the night and with the appropriate signal, inform them of the enemy's numbers and distance.

There's also a huge drum at the top of the platform, made for long distance communication.

But in Xiang Shaolong's perspective as a Special Task Force member, as long as the night is dark with no moon and making use of floating devices, it's not impossible to cross the river and get rid of the signal men atop these beacons. Once he thought of this, he shuddered, already knowing

what the enemy is waiting for.

They are waiting for a dark and moonless night, when dark clouds will cover the night sky.

Only under such a situation will they be able to carry out the sudden sneak attack by moving their troops across the river.

Xiang Shaolong came to the where Zhou Liang had pointed out, about 20 miles upstream and realized that the water is less rapid around this area and there are no dangerous cliffs on either side of the bank, an ideal place to build floating bridges to cross the river.

And it just so happens that there is a beacon there as well. From this it can be seen that when Meng Ao was building these beacons, he did put a lot of effort into it.

By now he knows what he should do and went back to camp.

The war cries of the enemy as well as their own men rang in the frontlines but the soldiers at the camp are all so used to it and those who have been given permission to rest are all sleeping, seemingly immune to the deafening battle drums and cries.

Xiang Shaolong went around on inspection and gave encouragement to the troops. He felt like he's the Minister of Defence who is visiting the hardworking soldiers at the frontline as everyone cheered when he approached and morale was boosted.

In the wars of ancient civilization, the morale of an army can directly influence the success or failure of a battle.

When he returned to his commander's tent, he saw Zhou Liang feeding fresh rabbit meat to Eagle King. As it turned out, he was unable to fall asleep.

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "Don't worry, as long as the sky remains clear, the enemy will find it difficult to cross the river. So don't be too tensed."

Zhou Liang heaved a sigh of relief, "That's much better."

Xiang Shaolong fell into a deep sleep once he returned to his tent and dreamt of Ji Yanran, the other ladies and Xiang Bao'er. He also dreamt of Qin Qing, whom he has lost contact for a long time and when he woke up he was hit with a painful wave of yearning.

That night, their enemy intensified their attacks and threw huge rocks with their siege machines and destroyed the Qin's first line of wooden barriers and filled up the ditches. The Qin army was forced to retreat to their second line of defense about half a mile away and only manage to drive the enemy away when they increased their numbers. There were casualties on both sides but of course the enemy suffered much larger losses as they are the attackers.

The next evening, Jing Jun leading an elite team of 2,000 cavalry arrived in camp and reported that the wounded and sick soldiers who were withdrawn are already on their way towards Zuicheng, and the grand army can come tonight.

Xiang Shaolong told Jing Jun about the enemy's intention to cross the river. Jing Jun commented, "The sky is red in the morning and night, looking at the sky it'll definitely rain

within these two nights. You can leave this matter to me. The enemy will need at least one night's work in order to build a floating bridge large enough to cross the river."

Cheng Jun who was standing by the side asked, "What does General Jing intend to do?"

Jing Jun thought for a moment before replying, "I will withdraw the sentry at the beacons there and if the enemy is bold enough to cross the river, I will wait until they are right in the middle of the river where they cannot retreat or advance and launch a massive attack. We just have to put a few dozen siege engines up there and I'll make them drink the waters of River De."

Xiang Shaolong complimented him, "Xiao Jun have indeed improved a lot. You'll be in total charge of this matter. Just remember that you must bring Zhou Liang with you."

He then asked Jing Shan in and ordered him, Wu Guang, Wu Da and Dan Quan to prepare torches and to climb the hill to burn the forest once it's night.

After the various teams of men have set off, Teng Yi's 'reinforcement troops' arrived.

Dotted across the hills were campfires and lights, most of them were lanterns hung up in the air. There were only a few thousand men but it was made to look as if an impressive tens of thousands men were there.

That night, dark clouds indeed covered the sky. The clouds were thick but yet to rain, a most opportune time for sneak

attacks.

Xiang Shaolong went up the viewing post at the frontline and saw that their enemy has gathered a large group of chariots, horses and foot soldiers with a few thousand siege engines and were preparing for a massive attack. Instead the dense woods on the left was totally quiet so he can imagine that in the midst of the battle, if a huge group of soldiers were to suddenly charge out from there, they will certainly be able to break through their solid defenses.

War drums were heard and the Wei army led the attack, moving in from the right. The atmosphere suddenly became tense.

On the left near the bank, the Zhao army followed by moving in as well and immediately their morale was greatly boosted.

After working with each other countless times, the coordination of the coalition army is now flawless. No wonder that the Qin army has to take a defeat every time.

The war drums sounded again and close to a thousand chariots rushed out from the middle of the enemy formation, followed by tens of thousands of archers behind them. Because they do not have cumbersome machineries like the siege machine, they were able to overtake the Wei and Zhao armies on both sides in an instant and come straight at them.

The chariots were about ten feet wide with two huge wheels on the sides, pulled along by four handsome horses. It's speed was astounding, giving one the feeling of great power

and in an instant they have crossed the flattened ditches, crossed the first line of defense that was destroyed and approaching the rolling hills at the end of the flat grassland.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was about to give the order to meet the attack head on, the chariots suddenly stopped and the horses were unbridled. The chariots were joined together to form a camp about two miles long.

The strangest thing is that every 30 feet, there will be a space wide enough for three men to pass side by side, making one wonder what is the use of that.

By now the enemy's foot soldiers came up running and after hiding behind the chariots, prepared their crossbows and arrows to prevent the Qins from coming out and counterattacking.

As the chariots were out of the range of the siege machines, Xiang Shaolong had no way of retaliating.

Cheng Jun sighed, "Great General's prediction is correct. Our enemy's move is to block our way in front and if they can really attack us from the back, we'll definitely cannot escape from the fate of being exterminated."

At this point in time they saw another team of vehicles coming up but it's no ordinary chariots but cumbersome supply trains. It advanced at an aching slow pace, even with eight donkeys they were dragging them with much labor so it's obviously those vehicles are filled with things like rocks.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong and Cheng Jun understand that the gaps that the chariots left in between earlier is to let these rocks vehicles pass to build another layer of base defenses nearer to themselves.

If they were to allow the other party to build up this vehicle base, their second line of defense may very well be breached by tonight.

But because the other party has already prepared chariots and archers for protection, they indeed have a chance to succeed in using vehicles to build up a base camp.

War cries were heard from their two sides, the enemy on their left and right are beginning their attacks.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed the area and according to his estimation, the enemy has at least invested 200,000 men in tonight's attack and their actual force is already more than twice of theirs. If their base camp is breached, they can only just wait to be killed.

On the enemy's side, five different colored banners were hung high up as they organized their formation. He can expect that Han Chuang will be one of them.

Cheng Jun and the other dozen odd generals all turned pale, obviously shell-shocked by their enemy's expertise in military stratagems and their overwhelming manpower.

Xiang Shaolong calculated the time and gave his order, "Call for a batch of 10,000 strong shield soldiers and archers, prepare the siege machines. When the dense forest on the

left side is on fire, leave camp immediately and attack to destroy the enemy's vehicle fortress."

The immediately went to carry out the orders.

War cries were heard again, a team of close to a thousand foot soldiers dashed out from the vehicle fortress and shot out fiery arrows.

The Qin's army camp immediately retaliated by throwing rocks to stop the enemy.

It's an extremely tragic situation. The originally dark sky is now shining a bloody red from all the fires being lighted.

It's the first time that Xiang Shaolong is personally experiencing a large scale attack and defense battle in ancient settings. He could feel his adrenalin rushing and at the same time a sense of sorrow welled up in him. This sort of mixed feelings is something that he cannot really explain.

When the enemy's hundred odd supply trains carting rocks and their siege machines were slowly approaching them, the dense forest on the right suddenly caught fire in a few areas and the fire was quickly spreading.

Just as Xiang Shaolong expected, countless soldiers who were in hiding ran out in alarm from the forest, most of them were riders who are the most reflexive.

The morale of Cheng Jun and the others were greatly boosted and their confidence in Xiang Shaolong soared as their enemy started panicking.



The war drums of the Qin army started beating as their gates opened and three groups of shield soldiers advanced forward with the archers following behind, launching a counterattack before the enemy's vehicle fortress had a chance to be formed again.

About 10,000 odd cavalry dashed out from the left and right sides simultaneously, charging at and killing the enemy and to disrupt the enemy's two huge army at the sides.

For a moment tens of thousands of men were thrown into the battle, bodies filled the plains and blood flowed like river.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize how brave and elite the Qin army is. On first contact they had dispersed the enemy's frontlines, killing them so mercilessly that they abandoned their vehicles and escaped. The most fatal blow to the enemy is that their transport vehicles and chariots have now become the stumbling blocks to their escape route and now the Qin archers can come nearer behind their vehicle base and launch a long distance attack while the enemy is still in frenzy.

War drums were heard again.

The Qin's archers now rushed out in a swarm to take over the cavalry who are now retreating back to camp, leaving behind a mess of overturned and burning chariots in their wake and totally disintegrating the enemy's first wave of attacks.

Xiang Shaolong knows that because the other party wants to

coordinate the attacks with the surprise troops who will be crossing the river to attack, they will not give up the battle so easily now. Their own wooden barriers and forts had been destroyed in many places either by the huge rocks thrown at them or burned by the fiery arrows, so he ordered the main force to retreat to the third line of defense.

By now the dense forest on the right is all covered in a fiery blaze, illuminating the whole battlefield with a reddish glow.

After their enemy retreated, the 50,000 to 60,000 enemy soldiers, under the cover of their various protection vehicles, launched a three pronged attack from the left, middle and right. This is the second wave of attack.

The battle thus continued in such heart-stopping situation.

The injured soldiers were constantly carried off the camp and by the time the second line of defense was almost lost, the sun was up. The enemy was too tired to continue and had to retreat.

Jing Shan and the rest returned safely at this point and Xiang Shaolong finally eased his worry.

Reports later came that Jing Shan had waited until after the enemy have built the floating bridges and were crossing it before launching a massive attack to destroy the floating bridges, causing the enemy to lose close to 10,000 men.

The morale of the Qin army soared immediately on hearing this news.

But Xiang Shaolong knows that they are bound to lose and

won't be able to last thru this night and gave the orders for men to be retreated in batches. But he did not forget to put up a show so that the enemy won't see through his plan.

After breakfast, the enemy launched their attacks again. Obviously they are still unaware that the river crossing soldiers had met with mishap.

They braced themselves until dusk and the second line of defense was finally lost. It's now time for the total retreat.

Xiang Shaolong is the last batch to leave. The whole camp was engulfed in flames, even spreading to the nearby hills so that it will make it difficult for the enemy to come after them. Only in such dangerous mountainous terrains can they make use of such methods to block the pursuing soldiers.

The coalition army indeed fell for the trap and ran after them.

Xiang Shaolong set up another second base at the westward roads and put up defenses there and had another round of fierce fighting with the coalition army for another five days until the main force had safely left the area. He then made a detour around the camp and escaped, planting traps and spikes along the way so that the enemy's cavalry will have difficulty running after them in full speed.

They had a few more skirmishes after that, and pretended to be defeated every time. By the time they retreated until Zuicheng, Xiang Shaolong knows that success is already at hand.

## CHAPTER 6

## Battle of Zuicheng

[Translated by JEAN]

HUAN QI came about 30 miles out of the city to receive them.

By now, the mounted troops which were originally made up of 10,000 cavalry and 20,000 backups were now left with a little over 20,000 men. From this it can be seen how intensive the battle chase was along the way.

They left the mountainous area and arrived at the wide open plains on the eastern side of Zuicheng where hills surround them on all sides. The Wei River that leads to the Yellow

River is about 50 miles north, flowing from the west to the east. Because of the numerous hills, unless one climbs up to a tall spot, one won't be able to see the grand view of the magnificent river flowing.

From Hangu all the way up north here, it's a distance of 300 miles.

Xiang Shaolong rode alongside Huan Qi as the army moved towards Zuicheng. The former saw that the defenses were done up very well, at the top of all the high points there were forts made from stones and said with satisfaction, "Xiao Qi is really capable. Just looking at the formation shown here will be enough to cause disappointment to Pang Nuan."

Huan Qi was overjoyed to be complimented, "Great General is risking your life at the frontline, how can I just hide here and enjoy my luxuries. Now Zuicheng has joined the army that had just retreated and the total force is now about 150,000 and everyone has been resting to conserve their energy. They are very clear Great General has now arrived to help them defend Zuicheng and are aware that you are luring the enemy westward to tire them out before giving them a painful blow, so now they're all rubbing their hands in anticipation and are willing to lay down their lives for Great General."

Jing Jun who was behind them had always been very close and open with Huan Qi so he chided jokingly, "So Xiao Qi is so crafty to know how to spread rumors. Luckily these

rumors have the effect of boosting morale, otherwise we'll certainly have you punished under martial law."

Everyone laughed.

Huan Qi waved at Zhou Liang, who was behind Xiang Shaolong and complimented, "Brother Zhou has made a great contribution this time. Now everyone in camp is addressing you as God of Eagles and once you're around, no one will have to worry about sneak attacks from the enemy."

Zhou Liang mouth split open into a wide smile as he caressed Eagle King who was on his shoulder and said some humbling words.

Amidst their jokes and conversation, they crossed the drawbridge over the river surrounding the city and went into the city.

The scene immediately gave Xiang Shaolong and the rest a huge shock.

The soldiers and civilians in the city have all gathered at the sides of the main street as they cheered wildly. It's as if they have already won the battle and returned in pride but in fact, the actual main battle has not even started.

Three days later, the coalition army's vanguards arrived at the eastern plains of Zuicheng.

Huan Qi made use of the fact that they were still tired from the long travel and their weakness in their unfamiliarity with the terrain to launch continuous attacks at them day and

night, burning their camps and supplies. The coalition army was forced to retreat more than 20 miles before they could stabilize themselves but by then they have lose close to 10,000 men and the impact to their morale was especially great.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest made use of this time to rest and recover their strength, practicing their formation all day at Zuicheng.

From the Mohist military stratagems, Xiang and Teng chose the formation that is most suited for their enclosed situation, the 'crab formation', which is to abandon the usual way of concentrating their force in the middle upfront but to use 'Frontal Troops', and to concentrate their force on both sides to attack using 'Secondary Troops'.

Because they are fighting with the city behind them, the 'Frontal Troops' can make use of the siege machines and archers situated on the high walls to strengthen their defenses so they're not worried that the enemy will make a frontal full force attack.

As for the secondary troops on either sides, they will be made up of mainly the best mounted troops and with their thick blades, are most suitable in missions such as this that requires them to use slash and assault tactics.

The enemy came from the west and along the way there are numerous hills so that cumbersome attack vehicles and siege machines will have to be abandoned along the way, reducing the threat to the Qin army. Currently the only

factor advantageous to the coalition army is their sheer numbers.

Now it's slowing going into autumn and if the coalition army cannot take over Zuicheng before the arrival of the harsh winter, they will be stuck in an icy situation or maybe even lose the whole army. That's why Xiang Shaolong is not worried that they will set themselves up for a long siege.

So as long as Xiang Shaolong is willing to leave the city to battle, Pang Nuan will only thank the Heaven and hope for a swift battle.

Ten days later, the coalition army moved closer to Zuicheng once again, slowing moving into the wide plains about 50 miles across outside the city of Zuicheng, setting up tents and camps on the side of the mountainous range and using war chariots to for defensive barriers.

Xiang Shaolong gave orders to cease all attacks on the enemy and allow them to stabilize themselves.

But the impending arrival of the great battle is looming over both the enemy and their own men, tightening the nerves of everyone.

Another three days later, all the troops of the coalition army arrived. Xiang Shaolong and the rest stood on top of the city wall and looked over and on the surface, their enemy indeed looked energetic without a trace of fatigue at all.

Huan Qi looked more intently and after a while, said with a smile, "If we talk about the quality and training of the



generals and soldiers, other than the Zhao army, the other four states in the coalition army are far below our standard. This time, General Meng kept getting defeated is due to the many years of fighting between them and Pang Nuan has already become very familiar with his fighting tactics. Therefore he can easily use various methods to target his weaknesses and hence gain victory.”

He paused and added, “General Wang Jian once said, looking at all the famed generals of the recent generation, only Bai Qi and Li Mu does not have a set formula in all their battles, nor do they follow any rules so others are unable predict their actions. As for the others, there will always be traces to be found. Now, General Wang should include General Xiang into that list as well.”

Xiang Shaolong chided jokingly, “You’re really getting better at boot-licking.”

Everyone joked and laughed together and the atmosphere relaxed. Teng Yi said, “Although the enemy suffered losses, they still have about 500,000 men left. But I’m not worried about that because all of them still harbor their own intentions and it’s not easy for them to work together. Besides the weather, water and terrain here is not advantageous to southern armies like the Chus. We’ve also blocked their nearby streams with rocks and sand so that it will make lives even more difficult for their tired soldiers. So although they have 500,000 men, we should take into consideration only 200,000 men, which is not far off from our own numbers. However we have solid city walls to

protect us and we're not worried about an extended war. The other party will have to hastily launch attacks to make the best use of time, so it's needless to point out who will have the better advantage."

Huan Qi looked far ahead and said, "Messengers are riding towards the left and right from the middle of the enemy camp. Obviously they are going to gather the various leaders to go to the middle army for a discussion. It seems like the enemy is going to launch a full scale attack soon."

Xiang Shaolong had an idea and said nonchalantly, "In my opinion this is just a show put up for us. If I am Pang Nuan and my troops are really strong and energetic with high morale, I will pretend to look tired and listless to lure us out of the city to attack. Now that they are pretending to show how fierce and active they are, it goes to show that they are actually guilty of being afraid that we'll attack them instead."

By this point in time Cheng Jun has already regarded Xiang Shaolong as a general from Heaven and agreed with his comment, "It's also written in military books, 'Whether the soldiers and horses appear brave will determine my victory or weakness. If the formation of an army is neat it instead shows that I will not engage in battle'. Great General's views are indeed wise."

Huan Qi, Teng Yi and Jing Jun's expressions all seemed interested.

Jing Jun immediately requested for permission to engage in battle.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that something will happen to him and ordered Huan Qi to back him up.

An hour later, the city gates opened and both of them, each leading 20,000 foot soldiers and cavalry as well as siege machines crossed over the plains and attacked the enemy formation.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi led another force behind, in case they had to cover their retreat.

They fought until dusk, destroying a few enemy camps before coming back to the city.

The next day it was the enemy's turn to approach for battle but the Qin army refused to come out, their only answer is a rain of arrows and the enemy had no choice but to return.

After three days of such tussles with both sides having casualties, on the fourth morning the coalition army finally lost their patience. Using their newly built siege vehicles, battering rams etc they launched a wide scale attack on the city.

Xiang Shaolong insisted on not moving and waited until the enemy is exhausted and retreating before launching his full force and setting up the prearranged formation outside the city.

Although the coalition army was unwilling to face this battle, they also did not want to miss the opportunity of fighting. Even more so they were afraid of being flushed by the Qin army so they sent all their troops to set up formation on the

other side of the plains as well.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi went up a small hill near the middle of the army to survey the enemy's military formation.

By then the sun has risen high up in the sky and the sun's bright rays reflected off the armors and weapons on men on both sides. The glittering lights filled the plains on both sides, filled with the tense atmosphere of an impending battle.

The coalition army's numbers are visibly lesser, only about 400,000 men split into five main formations.

The main force is concentrated in the middle, with foot soldiers forming the main bulk. In front of them are the chariots, behind them the cavalry, forming a front, middle, back formation.

On the left and right sides were swift cavalry.

The foot soldiers in the middle were further separated into nine small groups according to army type. The three at the foremost were the shield soldiers and light infantry while the other six groups were the main attack force consisting of the heavy armored infantry with about 20,000 men in each group holding defense equipment or weapons for long distance attacks like crossbows, spears, swords, shields, barricades, halberds etc. The space each group takes up and the distance between them fits the rule of military formations and they're definitely not a motley crew.

Teng Yi sighed, "It may be Third Brother's first attempt at leading an army but every time you predict things so accurately. Just like right now we're avoiding the enemy's main force in the middle and splitting our heavy infantry on the two sides, that's indeed a very wise move. Now even if Pang Nuan knows that something is wrong, it'll be difficult for him to change his formation. Besides he doesn't even know that all of our cavalry carries a thick blade that's at least half as formidable as Hundred Battles Blade which will guarantee to place our sword wielding enemy at a great disadvantage."

The battle drums of the enemy suddenly rung out and the almost 3,000 chariots gathered at the front gave a shout and started advancing with the infantry coming right behind them.

It seems that Eagle King, which was perched on Zhou Liang's shoulder, could feel the deadly battle atmosphere in the air and started flapping its wings and gave a low squawk.

Xiang Shaolong gave orders to stay put and the battle drums sounded immediately while the signal soldiers informed Huan Qi and Jing Jun who were on both ends using signal flags.

Just as they were about to approach shooting distance, the first two rows of the 3,000 chariots which was split into six rows suddenly increased speed and rushed forward.

Every chariot, other than the driver and some vehicle personnel, there were also a team of vehicle infantry

soldiers, each having their own duties,

The driver will control the vehicle, the vehicle personnel were given weapons like bows, crossbows, spears and halberds. Bows and crossbows will be used while they are still a distance away and spears and halberds will be used in close distance battles. The vehicle infantry will follow the chariots and work closely with the chariot to cover each other in defense and attack to magnify their fatality and defense.

The chariot's driver and vehicle personnel need not walk so they are attired with heavy armor and are not worried about arrows. With the war horses charging, they can really ride roughshod over the battlefield. If they are allowed to break into the formation, the defending troops can forget about maintaining their formations again and if the enemy continues with another wave of attack, they will certainly be doomed.

For a moment shouts and drums were heard on both sides as arrows flew and battle cries filled the air.

The enemy's cavalry on both two sides each sent out about 10,000 men to provide cover for the two sides of the centre attack force.

It's finally the start of the great battle.

Xiang Shaolong waited until the enemy is within shooting distance before ordering the siege engines at the top of the city to be fired.

Huge rocks rained down on the approaching enemy chariots from time to time.

Even as the vehicles overturned and the people fell, there were still close to a hundred chariots still making their way forward.

Xiang Shaolong gave an order and the Qin soldiers at the front line fell back like receding waves, revealing the countless ditches behind which was dug to make the horses fall. The enemy never expected the Qin army to have such a trick and immediately the chariots overturned and the people fell off, giving the Qins the opportunity to finish them off.

Arrows rained down from above the city walls and the foot soldiers who have lost the protection of the chariots all fell to the ground. The scene was so horrible that Xiang Shaolong could not bear watching it but there was nothing he could do.

In war, it's death for either you or me. There's no place for compassion at all.

By now the enemy's cavalry on the two sides have arrived.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the signal soldier to send out the flag signals and their own cavalry charged out from the left and right, each of them holding a broadsword and sliced their way through the sword wielding enemy cavalry, turning them into a mess as they fell off their horses.

The Qin's cavalry have always been better than the eastern

soldiers and now that they have a new weapon that is most suited to be used while on a horse, they are virtually unstoppable.

After Xiang Shaolong's army shattered the enemy's first wave of attack, they began to advance about a hundred steps forward towards the enemy's second wave of attacking chariots and foot soldiers. They arranged their formation again and used catapults and arrows for long distance attacks on the enemy.

By now the enemy's cavalry on both sides have lost terribly and the enemy's center army was worried that they will lose their protection cover on the two sides and end up being attacked on three sides so they hurriedly retreated.

However, chariots may be unstoppable when they are charging forward but they are not very easily turned or maneuvered so now that they are hastily reversing right in the middle of battle, the chariots knocked against one another and there was extreme chaos.

But it's not the fault of the coalition army for who would have thought that the cavalry on the two sides would be so utterly defeated so quickly.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the opportunity has arrived and once again gave orders for a full force attack.

Firsly Huan Qi and Jing Jun's 20,000 odd cavalry on both sides were hot on the tails of the defeated enemy, followed by the 60,000 infantry who were behind the cavalry who charged towards the enemy formation on the two sides.



With a center army made up of 40,000 foot soldiers, 10,000 cavalry and 1,000 Wu family warriors, Xiang Shaolong started the attack on the enemy's center army who were retreating. Their charge left the enemy's corpses everywhere, blood flowed like rivers and the scene was extremely horrifying.

The cavalry on the two sides swiftly broke into the enemy's formation and the coalition army panicked immediately as disruptions washed over them like waves and affected the whole situation.

Pang Nuan knows that something has gone wrong and sounded the drum signals to order the whole army to continue their fight against the enemy but now instead of being actively aggressive they have now become passive participants.

When the coalition army finally looked as if they are successfully keeping the Qin army away, Xiang Shaolong and a thousand Wu family warriors came charging out like tigers falling upon a flock of sheep, absolutely destroying the most formidable center army of the coalition army.

By now it goes without saying that the coalition army has lost and even if Sun Wu were to come back to life or if Bai Qi is here, they will not be able to overturn this outcome. After just an hour, the Chu army started by retreating and this move caused the coalition army to break down and the situation was chaotic.

The coalition army all abandoned their machinery and armor

to escape, no longer having the energy to fight back at all.

The Qin army went after them for about 20 odd miles, killing about 80,000 of them and captured about 20,000 men.

Never has the coalition army been defeated so badly in their united effort to attack Qin.

That night, Xiang Shaolong set up camp in the mountains, planning to get a good rest before running after the enemy again the next day so that they can regain whatever land they had lost.

Suddenly his men came to report that they have captured the enemy's Great General.

Xiang Shaolong did not even have time to wear his armor properly and dashed out of the tent to take a look. He was shocked to see a bloody and dirty looking Han Chuang being escorted dejectedly towards the tent. He saw Xiang Shaolong and said with a wry smile, "Brother Xiang, just give me an easy way out."

Xiang Shaolong was startled and shouted, "Untie him immediately!"

His men all treated him with the respect due to a deity and on hearing that, cut off the ropes immediately.

After Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to clean and treat Han Chuang's wounds, he invited him into the tent for a meal.

Han Chang laughed bitterly, "The story of Shaolong's battle will be spread all across the land and your reputation will be

on par if not better than Bai Qi. I concede defeat.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “We each work for different masters, this battle is something beyond all our control. Brother Han may sleep here tonight and you can ride back to your country tomorrow morning.”

Han Chuang was taken aback, “Shaolong, it’s a great crime to release an enemy general without permission, how can I not feel bad about it?”

Xiang Shaolong replied in all earnestly, “I can’t be bothered with this now. I will return your retainers to you as well. Brother Han, you must leave Qin’s borders as soon as possible. With the current situation, we have no choice but to pursue while we’re at an advantage.”

Han Chuang by nature is someone who’s afraid to die and now that he’s had this chance to live, he was overcome with tears of gratitude, “If I have to leave, I might as well go tonight. Ai! Shaolong is a true friend indeed.”

That night Shaolong sent Han Chuang and close to a thousand of his personal retainers away. The next morning, he sent the prisoners of war to Zuicheng and at the same time pursued the retreating enemy as well.

Although Pang Nuan tried to reassemble the coalition army along the way, but because of the low morale and lack of weapons and grains, they were forced to retreat in less than three days. Xiang Shaolong charged in and once again took control of Hangu Pass, totally destroying the dream of the five states to eliminate Qin.

Xiang Shaolong ordered the rebuilding of the pass and strengthen Hangu Pass's defense ability. After winter, Xiao Pan sent an envoy with an imperial edict that he and Zhu Ji ordered, promoting Xiang Shaolong as Commander-General while the other officials were promoted by another rank. Huan Qi and Cheng Jun were both promoted to Great General while Teng and Jing were promoted to the rank of General. Zhou Liang was promoted to become Deputy General. The others were also rewarded according to the contributions they made. The soldiers were given three times of their pay and at that moment everyone was overjoyed.

Other than Cheng Jun who had to stay behind to guard Hangu Pass, Xiang Shaolong and the rest were summoned back to Xianyang to take over their new posts.

This battle has made Xiang Shaolong famous far and wide, his reputation is now above Wang Jian and Meng Ao and is now regarded together with Wang Jian as Western Qin's two newest and bravest generals.

## CHAPTER 7

## Victorious Return

[Translated by JEAN]

XIANG SHAOLONG and the rest went up the ships which Xiao Pan sent to them and followed the river back to Xianyang, avoiding the arduous journey of a long road travel.

On the ships that came there were Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, Zhou Wei and Lu Dan'er, which was a pleasant surprise for Xiang Shaolong, Wu Guo and Jing Jun.

Wu Tingfang, the perfect mother who loves her son more than her own life did not come along because she wants to stay at home with Xiang Bao'er. Naturally the Tian sisters will

have to stay behind as well.

All of them happily updated one another of the events that had happened.

During dinner at the dining area of the ship, Xiang Shaolong asked about Qin Qing and Ji Yanran's expression became gloomy as she said, "Lady Huayang just passed away last month and Sister Qing wrote a letter back to say that she wants to observe a mourning period of one year for Lady Huayang and at the same time take care of the family business. She won't be able to return to Xianyang for the time being."

Dan'er, who was being all lovey-dovey with Jing Jun and whispering to him, said smugly, "Third Brother have yet to thank me. This time if not for me who kept pestering his Highness such that he cannot reject, how can you possibly be hugging Learned Lady Ji on your left and Sister Zhi on your right?"

Everyone saw that although she is already a wife, but she still retains the innocence of a young girl and they all smiled.

Zhou Wei said with a sigh, "Ever since all of you left for war, not only us, but the whole of Xianyang was really worried. The people on the streets all lost their smile, afraid that the coalition army will arrive at our gates. Only when the reports came, the whole city erupted in joy and everyone rushed out to the streets, dancing and singing all night long and constantly cheering his Highness and Master Xiang's names. They believed that the Black Dragon has protected them,

that's why we have such a miraculous outcome to the war."

Everyone was proud and touched at the same time.

Lu Dan'er's focus suddenly turned towards Huan Qi and with the air of an elder sister, commanded, "Xiao Qi, on your return to Xianyang this time, you should settle down and start a family. I'll make arrangements on this matter, you just have to listen to my instructions."

Wu Guo chortled, "If you listen to Lady Jing's suggestion, won't that be a blind marriage?"

Immediately everyone in the hall roared out in laughter.

As Lu Dan'er was staring angrily at Wu Guo, Ji Yanran said, "We heard that once Lu Buwei received news of your great victory, he lost his appetite for three days. Three days before we left to come here, he led his people and went to his new house at Donggun. But we suspect he has another ulterior motive, maybe he's gone to see people like Cheng Qiao and Du Bi."

Teng Yi asked, "How's Lu Buwei's relationship with Lao Ai now?"

Lu Dan'er fought to reply, "There's nothing much between the two of them, they even appeared close during Guan Zhongxie and Lu Nianrong's wedding, talking and laughing. But the people under them were having a good time fighting one another. Now the city guards are obviously split into two factions, on one side is Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang and on the other side is Han Xie. And Xu Shang and Han Xie are

fighting over Drunken Wind Loft's Yang Yu, arguing all the time."

She turned towards Xiang Shaolong and said, "Lord Changping instructed me to inform all of you first that he will be arranging another celebratory feast for all of you at Drunken Wind Loft."

Huan Qi was concerned about the reinforcement troops he singlehandedly trained and started asking about the Meng brothers and little Wang Bi's situation.

Zhao Zhi said, "His Highness has promoted Xiao Bi to General and sent him to Dongjiang to support Wang. That Li Mu is really formidable, all of his battles are swift. If not for Commander General Wang who is there to hold the fort, I'm afraid we'd have lost the four counties in the east."

Teng Yi asked about Meng Ao and Ji Yanran sighed, "He fell sick shortly after he was summoned back to Xianyang. That heartless man Lu Buwei was very cold towards him. Now Lu Buwei is fully supporting Guan Zhongxie, Xu Shang, Zhao Pu and Lian Jiao. Recently he sent Guan Zhongxie and Zhao Pu to attack Han and I heard they even manage to take over a city."

Xiang Shaolong thought that this is a big headache. After all Lu Buwei does hold power in his hands and now that he is in cahoots with Cheng Qiao and the rest, he'll be even more difficult to deal with. Guan Zhongxie is well versed in both scholarly and martial pursuits, if he turns into another Meng Ao and start to rebel at a later date, there will be even



greater trouble.

Everyone chatted for a while longer before returning to their own bunks to rest.

The two ladies happily helped Xiang Shaolong shower and change and when lying on the bed, Ji Yanran said softly, "The dowager went to Yongdu again, accompanying her was Lao Ai and Mao Jiao, can Husband guess what is happening?"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "She's expecting again?"

This is her second pregnancy with Lao Ai.

Ji Yanran nodded her head silently when Zhao Zhi plaster herself behind him from the back and said with emotion, "Xiang-lang! We missed you so badly!"

Learned Lady Ji who was in front of him blushed immediately as she gave him a coy look.

What followed after, is of course what everyone knows will happen.

When Xiang Shaolong and the rest were disembarking at the jetty outside Xianyang, the musicians started playing a welcome tune. Xiao Pan, Lord Changping and the other court officials have already been waiting a long time on shore.

On the way back to the Palace, the people filled the streets, cheering and letting off fireworks. Lanterns and banners were hung up in every household and the atmosphere was lively, filled with the Qin people's gratitude and enthusiasm.

The Crown Prince and Xiang Shaolong's name was constantly

being chanted.

Under Xiao Pan's lead, all of them went to the temple first to offer their prayers to the ancestors and late rulers of the Qin royal family and at the same time mourn for the warriors who perished in the war. After that, it was announced that a state feast will be held that night where the three armies will be given their rewards.

After that, Xiao Pan had a meeting with Xiang Shaolong at the inner court and with them were Xiao Pan's three other trusted aides, Wang Ling, Li Si and Lord Changping.

By this time, Xiao Pan is 19 years old in name, but in actual fact he is 21 years old. He's already an adult.

Although he is half a head shorter than Xiang Shaolong, but compared to the average person he is already considered well built. Besides, he has wide brows and a solid back, full of self confidence, his eyes deep with unfathomable knowledge. The power and influence that is befitting a ruler can indeed convince one to put down their lives for him.

He was just sitting casually but his imposing aura is enough to make one have the urge to rush forward and throw themselves at his feet.

After everyone congratulated Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan said happily, "So do you prefer me to address you as Grand Tutor or Commander General?"

Everyone roared in laughter.

Xiang Shaolong replied with a laugh, "I think Grand Tutor still

sounds much better.”

Xiao Pan shook his head and sighed, “Victorious but not proud. I’m afraid Grand Tutor is the only person like this in Great Qin. Grand Tutor’s battle have solidified Great Qin’s foundation to unify the world and have helped me regained my reputation greatly. Now no one will dare to talk behind my back and said that I’ve been treating Grand Tutor too well.”

Lord Changping smiled, “Lu Buwei has long been making a fuss over his Highness’s treatment of Han Chuang but his Highness just replied that ‘there’s no such thing’ and it’s enough to hold off Lu Buwei’s arguments. If anyone asks about it in future, Shaolong can use the same famous words as an answer.”

A warm feeling welled up in Xiang Shaolong’s heart.

Xiao Pan said, “This is just a small matter. Even if Han Chuang is released, how capable is he of doing anything substantial. This goes to show that Grand Tutor is not a heartless person like that Lu Buwei. But if you do manage to capture Li Mu in future, Grand Tutor must never release him.”

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of the possibility that he will meet the most respected and most fearsome Li Mu on the battlefield, his heart sank.

Wang Ling understands his feelings and said with a smile, “But for now such a situation will not arise. Right now Li Mu is moving his troops to attack Qi. Not only has he fought

back the Qi troops who were trying to make use of the opportunity to take over the Zhao people's land, he has also taken down Rao'an which belongs to Qi which gave his King some relief. Li Mu is indeed formidable. As long as this person remains, he will become our greatest obstacle in moving easy."

Li Si said, "This time Shaolong has executed his prowess. Even if Sun Wu is resurrected, he won't be able to win this battle as swiftly and beautifully."

After Xiang Shaolong expressed some humility, he had a thought and said, "Now that your Highness's power and influence has grown so greatly, it's time to summon Wang Jian back."

Lord Changping said, "That is indeed his Highness's intention, that's why he is planning to send the two brothers Meng Wu and Meng Tian to Wei for war. Once they have the experience, they can take over Wang Jian. But if we act rashly on this matter, this important position which will hold great power over the border soldiers may end up in the hands of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's men."

Xiao Pan lowered his voice, "Meng Ao is very seriously ill now. When I visited him some days ago, he was full of praise for Grand Tutor so it seems that he is indeed sorry."

Xiang Shaolong told them about how Meng Ao had asked him to take care of the Meng brothers.

Xiao Pan got excited, "Once the Dowager returns, I want to appoint Grand Tutor as Marquis. No matter what, Grand

Tutor's position cannot be any lower than Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong saw that there are others around and it's inconvenient to raise his objections so he just accepted without much enthusiasm.

In another three years Xiao Pan will be crowned as King. His only hope is that before that day arrives, if he need not to face Li Mu on the battlefield, this is enough to thank the Heavens.

Xiang Shaolong saw that there's another 6 hours before the state feast begins and after he managed to extricate himself, he went back to the Wu residence.

His welcoming neighbors filled the outside of the Wu residence and as soon as he stepped through the main door, firecrackers were lighted in the square and the whole atmosphere was celebratory.

Wu Yingyuan lead the family out personally to welcome him. He rushed forward to grab Xiang Shaolong's hands and said with emotion, "Our Wu family has finally come out with a famous general whose reputation will shake the earth, I'm so happy that I don't know what to say."

Xiang Bao'er covered his ears and ran into his arms.

After that Wu Tingfang and the Tian sisters also rushed towards him with tears and smiles.

Xiang Shaolong pacified them and hugging his wives and beloved son, went into the house. They first paid respects to the Wu family ancestors, showered and changed before

going back to the main hall again to receive the congratulatory wishes from their clansmen.

Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, Shan Lan, Lu Dan'er and the rest all changed into exquisite gowns to come out and play hosts to friends and family.

Teng Yi, Huan, Zhao Da and the rest have all returned and this added to the atmosphere of joy in the air.

Zhou Liang made great contributions thanks to the Eagle King so now his status in the Wu family is vastly different. The Eagle King also became the main focus of attention, even more than Xiang Shaolong as the children all gathered around it, pointing and expressing their admiration.

Wu Tingfang clung herself to Xiang Shaolong and behaved coquettishly. Although this pretty wife of his is more than 20 years old, but her looks and behavior is still as lively as when they just met when she was a young girl.

Xiang Shaolong found a chance to discuss with Teng Yi, "I plan to suggest to his Highness that I want to resign from the position of Cavalry Commander, so 2nd Brother will have to take care of them in future."

Teng Yi replied with a laugh, "Third Brother should know very well that I am not interested in a career at all. In my opinion, why don't we let Xiao Jun take over, with Wu Guo and Zhao Da supporting him. We can try to promote two more people at the same time."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Then make it Zhou Liang and Wu

Yan! The other guards can be rearranged to join the cavalry, they need not follow us back to the farm and live a boring life.”

Teng Yi nodded his head in agreement and thus the matter was settled.

By this time Wu Yingyuan had walked over and pulled both of them aside to say, “I just came back from the borders last month. Your sworn brother Wang Jian is indeed a brave general with both wits and courage that even the Xiongnu are not his match at all.”

He paused and added, “The Xiongnu have always been running roughshod at the northern borders. Their men, women, old and young are all good at horse riding and archery, vicious and brave. They come and go like the wind and can take hardship. How would they expect that they’ll first be defeated by Li Mu and after that suffer another defeat under your fourth brother. Wu Zhuo is now building a mountainous city around Lake Baikal and the nearby tribes who had often suffered under the Xiongnu have now come forward to seek protection. It’s best if we can send a thousand of our family warriors over to strengthen our hold, then we can have more confidence to expand.”

Xiang and Teng kept on nodding their agreement and both looked extremely eager about the idea.

Only when one is in his own country and home can one really feel the freedom and happiness.

That night at the Palace, Xiao Pan hosted the celebratory

feast and all the citizens in the city were given food and wine.

To Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong's victory in battle felt like his own victory in battle so he was especially satisfied and happy.

Naturally Xiang Shaolong became the focus of the feast as wine cups keep getting topped up. Halfway through the feast he was already so dead drunk that he didn't even know how he managed to leave the place. When he woke up the next day, he realized he was sleeping on the future Emperor Qin's dragon bed. It turned out it was Xiao Pan who insisted on giving him such treatment.

Ji Yanran and the rest all stayed in the Palace as well, waiting for him to wake up.

When Xiao Pan returned, he had lunch with Xiang Shaolong at the rest and it feels like a close family enjoying bonding time together.

Xiang Shaolong brought up the suggestion of letting Jing Jun become the Cavalry Commander with Wu Guo, Zhou Liang and Zhao Da as the Deputy Commander and Xiao Pan agreed immediately, saying with a smile, "It's just a mere Cavalry Commander position, and really should not be under Commander General's portfolio as well."

Xiang Shaolong again took the chance to bring up the issue of him returning to the farm to spend some relaxing time. Although Xiao Pan was not very willing, he still agreed.



After the meal, Xiang Shaolong went back to the Wu residence with his wives and son and after a nap, woke up feeling refreshed.

Ji Yanran with his pretty wives and the Tian sisters were sitting on the mat chatting away, talking about Xiang Bao'er's funny antics. The happy atmosphere was enough to melt his heart, giving him a sense of warmth and sweetness.

Compared to the cruelty of war, this is indeed a loving heaven.

The ladies saw that he has woken up and hurriedly helped him up.

Ji Yanran whispered quietly in his ears, "Housekeeper Tu asked to meet you at the usual place at dusk and Lord Changping have booked a courtyard at Drunken Wind Loft tonight and invited you to the feast. Hai! Doesn't Lord Changping know that after your return, you've yet to have time to stay at home and accompany your wives and children?"

Wu Tingfang, who was at the side, pouted, "If you don't come back tonight, Fang'er will not go up the bed to sleep."

Xiang Shaolong almost had to make a vow that he will come back early before the two ladies were happy again.

A long parting is even more meaningful than a new marriage so when the Tian sisters helped him bath, Xiang Shaolong pulled Wu Tingfang and the rest all into the bath and consoled his wives and concubines with action.

He played with Xiang Bao'er for a little before leaving 'incognito' to meet Tu Xian.

After they met at the secret place, Tu Xian made some small talk before going into the main topic, "Shaolong has managed to show off your prowess and defeated the coalition army and at the same time disrupted Lu Buwei's plans. Now that Meng Ao is seriously ill, he'll have no choice but to change his tactics. Now not only is he in cahoots with Du Bi and the rest, he's also trying to pull Lao Ai to his side and still trying to struggle against imminent death."

He paused and added, "That old thief has totally lost faith with his Highness, knowing that the day his Highness is crowned King will be the day of his defeat so he'll definitely make a final fight before that day and rebel. We must be on the alert against this."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Now that his Highness's power is growing day by day, Lao Ai won't believe him so easily. What tricks can that Lu thief still be up to?"

Tu Xian sighed, "If there are benefits, there will be collaborations and the problem is that Lao Ai wants to rebel. You must know that Lao Ai is after all an evil and unrepentant hooligan, a scoundrel at heart. Although he has Zhu Ji's favor but in the eyes of the Qins, he's just a lucky servant who manages to jump ranks and don the outfit of a eunuch official. Other than Lu Buwei, who has an ulterior motive, who else would be willing to support him. Under such circumstances, it's not impossible that the two of them

will once again collude with each other. Of course their relationship will not last and I think the day that the rebellion is successful will be the day they fall apart.”

Xiang Shaolong asked worriedly, “Will Zhu Ji really just sit and watch while Lao Ai topple her own son?”

Tu Xian signed, “Zhu Ji has already sunken in too deeply, besides Lao Ai is especially skilful in handling women. And Zhu Ji’s craving for a moment of fun has accidentally resulted in Lao Ai’s grow to power, enough for him to form his own cohort. After Shaolong went to war, Lao Ai interfered in all matters big and small in his capacity as leader of the court officials, to the extent of addressing himself as ‘Foster Father’ so one can see his true intentions.”

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, “Foster Father? To think that he could think of that. First it was Lu Buwei, then it’s Lao Ai. Don’t they ever think that by riding on the head of the ruler, they might attract death?”

Tu xian signed, “How many people can be like Shaolong who will retreat once mission is accomplished and avoiding the outcome of being a ‘dead rabbit or cooked dog’<sup>22</sup>. I heard from Mister Tao that the day His Highness is crowned King will be the day all of you will retire to the north. I wonder if you’d be willing to let my clan follow behind you as well?”

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<sup>22</sup> *dead rabbit or cooked dog* – a Chinese idiom referring to the King of Yue during the Warring States Period. King of Yue is a person whom one can only share hardship with, but never fortune and glory. When he was fighting against Wu, he was very good with his men and formed deep friendship but once they won the war, his attitude changed and those who helped him risk being put to death for minor matters.

Xiang Shaolong replied solemnly, "To be able to ride side by side with you on the great plains of the north would be something that I will absolutely wish for."

Tu Xian was so touched that he reached out and grabbed his hands, unable to speak at the moment.

Xiang Shaolong asked about Lu Buwei's situation and Tu Xian replied, "I almost forgot one thing. Two swordsmen from the state of Qi came recently, they are both disciples of Jixia Academy's Sword Sage, Cao Qiudao. One of them is called Ren Qianli and the other is Fang Yong. They seldom show themselves and are very secretive. If my guess is correct, they must be skilled fighters sent to Xianyang by Tian Dan under Lu Buwei's request in case there is a need to assassinate Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, "If that is the case, why would they let Brother Tu find out about their identities?"

Tu Xian chortled, "That's because I have a lot of spies and links, and they overheard the private conversation between them and Xu Shang, and with the facts I was able to guess that Tian Dan is behind this. Now the person Lu and Tian hates most is Shaolong so even if benefits is not a consideration in killing Shaolong, it will at least give them a sense of joy in getting rid of you."

Xiang Shaolong guffawed, "You think there're not enough people who want me dead? Oh right, is that Xu Shang fighting with Han Jie over Yang Yu? Isn't that almost like their version of a continuation of Lu's fight over Meimei?"

Tu Xian gave a cold snort, "What's there to fight over, Lu Buwei have already given strict orders to Xu Shang not to fight with Han Jie, that's how I found out that Lu Buwei intends to collude with Lao Ai. Humph! Ever since that lad became an official, he's getting more and more conceited. Any verbal disagreements and he'll start hitting people and because he has the backing of Lao Ai, even his Highness can't do anything to him. But now Han Jie have lost interest in Yang Yu because a new beauty, who is even prettier than Dan Meimei have arrived at Drunken Wind Loft. This lady can indeed evoke pity from anyone who sees her and she has insisted that she will only sell her craft but not her body so which man would not want to have a taste of her."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed in surprise, "There's such a thing as selling only the craft but not the body? Who can protect her?"

Tu Xian replied, "Just based on her name Feng Fei from 'Dainty Swallow' alone is enough to ensure her chastity. But she came at a very coincidental time, just three days before Shaolong came back to Xianyang. Now she's already creating a big stir amongst the officials and royalty and everyone is making a beeline for Drunken Wind Loft now."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Is Brother Tu hinting that she's here to deal with me?"

Tu Xian sighed, "Feng Fei is the best of the three famed courtesans and very respected amongst the royalty in the various states. She used to be a Princess from Song but for

some reason ended up as a courtesan. Rightfully speaking, no one should be able to make her do anything but it doesn't hurt to be on the alert so Shaolong better be careful. Now Shaolong is the man most wanted dead among the 6 states."

Xiang Shaolong smiled wryly, "The problem is I'll be going to Drunken Wind Loft tonight and hopefully my bunch of friends have not picked her to accompany me."

Tu Xian said with a smile, "If she's willing to drink with you, then Shaolong should be even more careful because ever since she arrived in Xianyang, she has not agreed to drink with anyone yet."

Xiang Shaolong laughed ironically before he sighed, "Beauties just have that kind of mesmerizing power. We men obviously know that they are up to no good but no matter what, we'll always be able to find some good points about them and forget that maybe behind their exterior beauty is an evil heart."

Tu Xian said with a smile, "You'll understand once you see Feng Fei. She definitely is a stunner who possesses both interior and exterior beauty as well as intelligence. Maybe because of the different stands, she will become a manipulative enemy. Luckily Shaolong has always been able to resist beauties so no matter what ulterior motive Feng Fei has, she will not be able to execute them."

After chatting a little longer, the both of them parted.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly have the urge to visit the critically

ill Meng Ao but because he had to attend Lord Changping's banquet, he had no choice but to leave this visit until the next day.

## CHAPTER 8

## Dainty Beauty

[Translated by JEAN]

WHEN Xiang Shaolong and his 18 guards arrived at Drunken Wind Loft, Wu Fu came out personally to welcome him and after inviting him into the side hall and asking the servants to leave, he knelt down and kow tow.

Xiang Shaolong is long used to his flunky ways so he stood proudly and asked with exasperation, "Please dispense with ceremony, what are you up to this time?"

Wu Fu stood up in shock and said respectfully, "I wouldn't dare to use trickery in front of Commander General. This



time I have important news to report to you.”

Xiang Shaolong sat down and said, “Sit down and talk!”

Wu Fu sat down and after looking left and right, as if afraid there’s someone in the side halls, he lowered his voice and said, “Lu Buwei is plotting to kill you and Wang Jian.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled, “Of course he’s thinking about it, but whether he succeeds or not is another matter.”

Wu Fu said tactfully, “It was only after a long period of eavesdropping that I managed to string together all the bits of information and found out about their nefarious plot!”

Xiang Shaolong remembered the metal pipes he used to eavesdrop and asked doubtfully, “Why is Lu Buwei still coming here since Dan Meimei has already become the Empress of Wei?”

Wu Fu said, “That’s what you are unaware of. Half a year ago I spent a fortune in Chu to buy over a great beauty from Yue called Bai Yaya and Lu Buwei is very much enchanted with her so he comes to Drunken Wind Loft regularly. Now Yaya has taken over Meimei’s position to become the head of the four beauties. Hai! Meimei’s departure almost cost me my life, but of course! I would never dare to blame Master Xiang, I do deserve the punishment.”

Xiang Shaolong said with exasperation, “Stop beating around the bush, come straight to the point!”

Wu fu lowered his voice and came closer, “First they are going to deal with General Wang. Because General Wang is

battling at the Zhao border, there are many areas which he will need to rely on the support of Du Bi and Cheng Qiao and Lu Buwei is going to make use of Du Bi to sabotage General Wang when he is fighting against Li Mu. The outcome should be expected.”

As Xiang Shaolong is not aware of the situation over that side and so have never expected such a possibility, he paled and asked, “Isn’t Li Mu fighting against the Qi?”

Wu Fu commented, “That could be an evil plan to lure General Wang deeper into the Zhao border!”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, “Why didn’t you reveal such an important piece of news earlier, even if I’m not in Xianyang, you can always tell Lord Changping!”

Wu Fu said apologetically, “Well, I only heard bits and pieces of information so I can’t be very sure. Until the day before, Yang Yu told me that Xu Shang was boasting to her that you are going to be very short-lived that my thoughts start to clear up. Xu Shang was saying that your victory in battle this time have planted the seed to your demise in future. Yang Yu was puzzled and asked him further but he only said that no matter how formidable you are, you will not be able to win Li Mu, and he did not elaborate further. That’s why I thought that only if they cause the death of Wang Jian, will you need to meet Li Mu on the battlefield in such a short period of time, that’s why...”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly stood up, “Go and tell Lord Changping that I will be there late.”

He then left hurriedly and went to the Palace to seek an audience with Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was having fun playing chess with his beloved concubine Wang Meixiu when he saw him arriving in such haste and knew that something urgent has happened. He immediately summoned to meet him in the inner hall.

After Xiang Shaolong expressed Wu Fu's deduction, Xiao Pan's expression changed, "This is indeed an extremely vicious plan. It's obvious that as long as Cheng Qiao is not eliminated, my position will always be shaky."

Xiao Pan then summoned his guard and gave instructions for him to send out a messenger with a swift horse to Shangchuan and warn Wang Jian to be on his alert.

After this matter is settled, the future Emperor Qin said seriously, "If anything untoward happens to Great General Wang, we'll deal with Cheng Qiao and Du Bi immediately and get rid of these thorns in my flesh. By that time I'll want to see how Lu Buwei ends up."

He then smiled and said quietly, "The Crown Princess is expecting!"

Only now did Xiang Shaolong suddenly realize that he has indeed grown up, and congratulated him from the bottom of his heart.

Xiao Pan said worriedly, "Given the opportunity that Lu Buwei and the Dowager are both not in Xianyang, it's best to give the child a good name first so they won't have the

chance to change it. What suggestion does Tutor have?"

Xiang Shaolong blurted out, "Then it must be Fu Su."

Xiao Pan looked at him in shock for a few moments and just when Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing himself, this future Emperor Qin nodded his head, "This is quite a unique name. But I'll need a name for a girl as well, so no matter if it's a boy or girl, there's already a name."

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief, "I only thought of a boy's name, seems that this must be a baby boy so there's no need to think of another girl's name."

Xiao Pan silently mumbled the name Fu Su a few times and said happily, "If it's really a son, then let's call him Fu Su!"

Xiang Shaolong felt a little awkward, knowing that he has influenced history with his own knowledge of history. The took the opportunity to take his leave and by the time he rushed to Drunken Wind Loft, he's already more than an hour late.

Besides Lord Changping and his brother, Li Si, Huan Qi, Jing Jun, Wang Ling, Wu Guo, Zhou Liang etc, he did not expect to see Wang Wan, Cai Ze, Ying Ao and Ying Lou as well and obviously these people have leaned towards Xiao Pan's political faction. Teng Yi came only for a while because he wanted to spend time with his wife and child.

Yang Yu, Gui Yan and Bai Lei were all there with the prettier ladies of Drunken Wind Loft, providing one to one service, with each lady attending to a person and the atmosphere

was lively.

Xiang Shaolong was given the seat at the head of the table and the Yue beauty Bai Yaya have been waiting a long time for him to arrive. This lady was dressed in Chu garb, about 18 years old and indeed very pretty, comparable to Dan Meimei. Not only is she refined but most enchantingly, she is very gentle, her pretty eyes filled with intense feelings. Her voice is sweet and soft and indeed she is a rare treasure. No wonder Wu Fu can use her to handle Lu Buwei, who had suffered the loss of Dan Meimei.

But when he thought of how ultimately, her fate may end up to become Lu Buwei's concubine, he felt sad.

Before Xiang Shaolong could even warm his seat, he was made to drink 3 cups of wine as punishment and raised his arms in surrender, "If I go on drinking, I'm afraid I'll have to be carried out immediately. Everyone, please have mercy on me and let me off this time!"

Wang Wan laughed, "Last night Lord Xiang only collapsed after drinking more than 20 cups, so tonight you must at least drink another 7 cups before we forgive you for coming late."

Just as they were arguing, Bai Yaya smiled delicately and said, "Then let Yaya drink a few cups of punishment wine in Great General's place."

Everyone shouted their agreement.

Cai Ze said with a smile, "But this punishment wine must first

go into Great General's mouth first before our Yaya can drink on his behalf.

There was another uproar of agreement.

Bai Yaya whined as she fell into Xiang Shaolong's arms, her pretty eyes half-closed and her sweet face blushing, like a little bird leaning towards him.

Although Xiang Shaolong has long gotten used to such lascivious styles in this Warring States Period but because this youthful beauty is so hot and fresh, he felt excited and making use of his slightly intoxicated stage and the cheers of everyone, he enjoyed her fragrant lips thoroughly.

Only then did they let him off.

Ying Ao said with a smile, "I heard that after Pang Nuan lost in the war, the other states in the coalition army all berated him for being careless and stretching himself too far and lost this great opportunity to defeat us Qins and now his reputation is in tatters. Seems that it will be quite impossible for them to come together again."

Ying Lou added, "After the defeat, everyone is trying to push the blame to others. At the battle of Zuicheng this time, the ones who left the earliest were the Chus, so now they've become the target of blame for the others and everyone is very unhappy. The five states will be on bad terms for quite some time."

Li Si clapped his hands, "Tonight we will only speak of enjoyment and not business. The Dainty Swallow Dance

which was prepared for Shaolong should be able to start now!"

Lord Changping made an eye signal at Wu Fu, who was seated at the end of the table and the latter hurriedly left to make arrangements.

Jing Jun said with a laugh, "Just by seeing how our Lord Minister of Justice is even more nervous than Third Brother, we know how attractive Feng Fei can be!"

Everyone expressed their agreement and Li Si, who seldom steps into such places of entertainment, became extremely embarrassed.

Xiang Shaolong was totally relaxed as he enjoyed the feeling of camaraderie among them.

Bai Yaya leaned closer and whispered in his ears, "Master Xiang did not harbor grudges and helped Miss Meimei become her Queen of Wei, all the sisters in Drunken Wind Loft are extremely grateful."

Xiang Shaolong lowered his voice to ask, "So won't whole city learn of this matter?"

Bai Yaya said with a smile, "This is called good news travel far! Now Master Xiang just have to crook your fingers and everyone will come running to help Master Xiang spend the night!"

Of course Xiang Shaolong did not believe her because at least Guiyan alone hates him to the core.

Bai Yaya looked at him coquettishly and asked shyly, "I wonder if Yaya would be able to receive Master Xiang's attention?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that she was entirely bewitching and the fatal point is that she is so graceful that he can't help but feel a surge of lust and said quietly, "Not tonight, let me see when!" Bai Yaya breathed out softly into his ear as she nibbled his lobes and said, "Daytime is fine as well, then Master Xiang's wives won't find out."

Xiang Shaolong thought of his dedicated wives at home and immediately awoke from the haze. He was about to tactfully reject her when Wu Fu came in with a look of helplessness, attracting everyone's attention.

Lord Changping knows that something has gone wrong and asked, "Is the beauty blaming us for being late?"

Wu Fu replied bitterly, "Seems like that's the case. Miss Fei have returned to her quarters to sleep and no matter what good words I say, it's of no use."

Strangely not only is everyone not feeling that she's throwing airs, but they think that what she has done is very reasonable indeed.

Lord Changwen smiled, "Shaolong's the one who caused all this trouble and offended our dainty beauty. I suggest that Shaolong should go apologize and pacify her back here."

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, "What?"

For some reason Li Si was especially excited and he actually



agreed, "The dainty beauty will be going to Wei the day after, Shaolong you better go quick and think of a way."

Huan Qi asked in surprise, "Are you people actually here to congratulate Great General Xiang or to see the dainty beauty?"

Lord Changping and the rest all roared out in laughter. The situation was chaotic but very interested as well.

Xiang Shaolong's curiosity was piqued and he reluctantly stood up and sighed, "I will try my best but if I get thrown back here, all of you must not blame me."

Amidst thunderous applause, Xiang Shaolong followed Wu Fu out but he had only taken a few steps when Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Lord Wenchang ran out after him, saying that they want to see what happens from the door.

Xiang Shaolong was influenced by the playful atmosphere and gathered up the valor he had when he was fighting and creating trouble during the 21st century and led the three of them, with Wu Fu leading the way, towards the buildings at the back.

In a quiet corner at the back yard of Drunken Wind Loft, next to the pond there was a small wooden cottage, looking very antique and exquisite with the fragrance of flowers surrounding it.

Wu Fu said, "That's where Feng Fei lives. Her personal maid is very fierce, she was the one who kept me out earlier."

Jing Jun was taken aback, "Doesn't she know you're the

boss? How dare she be so rude to you.”

Wu Fu replied, “She’s specially invited by the Crown Princess to perform at the Dowager’s birthday feast, would I dare to offend them?”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand what’s happening and he was slightly less worried. He gave a dry cough and said, “Watch me!”

He had just taken a step when Lord Wenchang pulled him back with a reminder, “I heard that Feng Fei is as light as a swallow, and she is quite skilled so Great General better not let her kick you into the pond.”

The three of them laughed over his misfortune at the same time, their attitude extremely irritating.

Xiang Shaolong cursed silently, swept Lord Wenchang aside and walked towards the cottage with his chest puffed up.

The wooden door opened easily as he pushed but the lower level of the cottage was quiet with no one around. Xiang Shaolong took a look around and saw the stairs leading up to the second level so he took a deep breath to steady his nerves before going up the stairs.

The wooden steps creaked under his feet and the sound can indeed make one nervous.

A clear, crisp voice came from above, “Who’s that?”

Xiang Shaolong did not answer deliberately and when he reached the second level, a handsome looking young boy

lifted the curtain to the room and walked right into him.

Both of them were equally shocked.

Xiang Shaolong did not expect himself to knock into a pretty boy instead of a pretty maid, while the other party did not expect a strange man to find his way upstairs.

Xiang Shaolong took a quick glance inside but because the door curtains were dense and heavy, naturally he could not see anything at all.

The thought of it is quite funny.

In the short span of two years, he had met with three famed courtesans and at least one of them tried to take his life. And then they left.

The Spring-Autumn Warring States period is indeed a unique, splendid and very uninhibited era. Even though everyone is constantly at war but amidst the partings and reunions, the Qi people can go to Wei, the Wei people can enter Qin, the Yan people comes down south while the Chu people went up north, selling their skills in exchange for fame and fortune or travelling and expounding their studies and theories. Everyone is fighting for a chance to shine, like thousands of flowers blooming at the same time.

A world famous courtesan like Feng Fei has superseded the fights amongst the states. No matter where she goes, she is well respected and can throw tantrums whenever she likes, put on airs whenever she likes. If he had not seen it with his own eyes, it'll really be very difficult to imagine.

The Three Famed Courtesans came one after another to Xianyang and this goes to show that Xianyang has become one of the center of the arts in the world and that's what attracted them here because of various reasons.

Just as he was pondering, the handsome young boy shouted angrily, "Who are you, how dare you barge into a lady's private chambers?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that 'he' is guarding outside the door with such hostility so he replied with a slight smile, "I am Xiang Shaolong and I've come especially to seek forgiveness with Miss Feng."

There was no response from inside at all.

Xiang Shaolong had expected her to put on airs so he was not embarrassed. He took two steps towards the pretty boy and was almost face to face with her.

The pretty boy's nose and forehead creased at the same time, as if afraid that Xiang Shaolong would have body odor but he did not scold him at all, for example, scolding him for being rude. The pretty face looks almost displeased but not yet, and is extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong's heart lurched and he said quietly, "If young lady would make way, I'll go in to see Miss Feng but if young lady disallows, I have no choice but to leave immediately."

He deliberately lifted his voice so that Feng Fei who is inside can hear everything clearly.

The pretty kid is obviously not Xiang Shaolong's match and

was totally at a loss, not knowing how to deal with him.

A gentle, sweet lady's voice rang out from within the room, "Little Sister, please let Lord Xiang come in for a talk!"

The pretty kid called out in acknowledgement and lowered her head as she stood aside, giving him access to the room.

Xiang Shaolong gave a smile in reply before stepping over the ledge and lifting the curtains into the room.

He did not expect the hall inside to be even wider and bigger than the outer hall. There were windows on three sides and on the left, a bamboo curtain segregated the living quarters where the bed is placed.

Feng Fei was seated on the floor, leaning on a soft pillow with a long table in front of her with a five-stringed zither on it. She looked as if she's elegant, rapturous and warmly comfortable.

The leader of the Three Famed Courtesans lifted her melon-seed shaped face and looked towards him, her jewel like bright eyes matched with her fair and pinkish skin exuding an attractive aura which seems to come from within her made Xiang Shaolong's eyes brighten.

But what is most attractive about her is her air of heartrending gracefulness, which anyone would take pity on upon seeing her. This made him think of Li Yanyan who is far away within the Chu borders.

Any man who shows concern and protection of ladies will not bear to hurt her.

Just by sitting there casually, she has already displayed the most attractive and alluring pose a woman can make to perfection. Her dainty and striking body makes one have the urge to press her down with one's body, no wonder even Tu Xian is extremely interested in her as well.

Her ability to enchant men is indeed better than Shi Sufang and Lan Gongnuan.

Just as the two of them were measuring up each other, the little girl outside who was disguised as a boy called out, "Missy! Do you want tea or wine?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, "It's all right, I'm here especially to apologize to Miss and wouldn't dare to disturb your tranquility."

Feng Fei guffawed, "Tranquility? Living in a mundane world, how can there be tranquility? Lord Xiang, please take a seat. Lass, prepare tea for our guest."

When Xiang Shaolong sat down, he suppressed the urge to give her the once over and just looked straight ahead. Just as he was about to speak, Feng Fei asked gently, "It's not like Lord Xiang's style to come and apologize, I wonder if you were coerced or did you come willingly?"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "It's the first time I met Miss, but why do you seem so knowledgeable about me?"

Feng Fei smiled and replied slowly, "Xiang Shaolong is the most talked about person amongst the powerful circles in all six states, I've heard so many things about you. Besides,

before I came to Qin I've heard of Lady Meimei of Wei speak of you, so of course I should have an impression of you!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "Miss Feng deliberately refused to perform this time, is it because.... Hai! Is it because..."

Feng Fei seemed very interested as she encouraged him, "Why are you hesitating? Just speak your mind."

Xiang Shaolong said wryly, "I wanted to ask if this is a deliberate trick by Miss to make me come here to see you but I'm afraid my frankness will shock you, that's why I was hesitating. You must find this a joke."

Feng Fei let out a tinkling laughter, her mesmerizing eyes glanced at him as she lifted her slender left hand and lowered her head to look at the shiny and exquisite silver ring at her little finger, saying gently, "Lord Xiang's guess is correct but I'm afraid you did not expect that Feng Fei is up to no good this time. This silver ring is made by a talented smith from Wei and can shoot out poisoned needles, injecting poisoned liquid into a person's body. If it's shot at the right position, the person shot will die very swiftly of poison."

## CHAPTER 9

## Delicate Trap

[Translated by JEAN]

AFTER Meng Ao's funeral, Jing Jun was officially promoted to become the Commander of the Cavalry. As he had married into the Lu family, all the important officials in the military gave their utmost support on Lord Lu's account.

Wu Guo, Zhao Da and Zhou Liang became his deputies so now the cavalry is now a unit totally under the Crown Prince's control, unlike the city troops who are under the control of the two factions headed by Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, fighting against each other.



Of course, if Lu and Lao works together, it'll be another matter altogether.

Because of Xiao Pan's acknowledgement of their abilities, the 18 Warriors became the leaders of his personal guards so their status are greatly raised too.

Huan Qi is still in charge of training the reinforcement troops while Meng Wu and Meng Tian will immediately lead troops to attack Wei once they have settled their father's funeral arrangements to take revenge against the Weis for joining the coalition army.

Basically, Qin is still using the same strategy of attacking the nearby states while maintaining good relations with the states further away, which is to pacify Chu, Qi and Yan and only lead troops against the other 3 states.

Xiang Shaolong took the opportunity to take a break and went back to the farm with Teng Yi's family as well. He practices his swordplay, archery and riding skills daily, and will tour around the scenic places when idle, living a carefree life playing with his son.

Spring left and summer came. On this day he returned to the courtyard and received a letter that Qin Qing sent a messenger to deliver.

It turns out that this pretty lady have decided on a return date, and will come back to Xianyang early autumn. Although she did not mention a word about her feelings in the letter, but her fiery love can be felt without the use of words and from this it shows how refined this beauty is,

which makes a boor like Xiang Shaolong love and respect her even more.

Tao Fang regularly brings news to the farm as well.

Lu Buwei returned to Xianyang, and after that went to Bashu again, something which no one can seem to understand.

Lao Ai and the Dowager Zhu Ji has returned to Xianyang. Lao Ai's attitude is even more conceited now, not even taking into regard Lord Changping, Wang Ling and the rest of the senior officials. He'll bring up Zhu Ji's name in every matter and Xiao Pan had no choice but to tolerate him bitterly.

Guan Zhongxie won a few battles in Han and was promoted to Great General, slowly taking over Meng Ao's position.

But of course his reputation and power is still far beneath.

Meng Wu and his brother had a few swift battles in Wei, taking down Zhao and their reputation increased, becoming the new stars of the next generation of generals.

The thing that Xiang Shaolong was most worried about is that Wang Chi has indeed fallen into a trap. He took the opportunity when Li Mu moved his troops to attack Qi to sent his men to attack the Zhaos. Xiang Shaolong can only hope that the messenger Xiao Pan sent out can give the warning to Wang Chi in time, otherwise he'll be sandwiched by enemies and his situation will be extremely dangerous.

Just as he was worrying about all these, bad news came at the end of May. Wang Chi was bitterly defeated by Li Mu and died in battle. Wang Bi and Yang Rui led the remaining

defeated troops back to Shangchuan.

The thing that Xiang Shaolong most wanted to avoid has finally happened.

Lu Buwei's nefarious plot has once again succeeded.

And Xiang Shaolong's happy and carefree life will soon come to an end.

By the time Xiang Shaolong returned to the palace in Xianyang on swift horses, he could feel a cloud of gloom over the place.

Ever since Lord Xinling led the coalition army outside Handan 16 years ago and greatly defeated the Qin army, the Qins have never experienced a situation whereby a great general with the status of Wang Chi would actually die in battle. The enormity of the setback this time really cannot be calculated.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived at the library, Wang Ling, Li Si, Lord Changping, Lao Ai, Wang Guan, Cai Ze and the other senior officials were already outside the door waiting for Xiao Pan to summon them.

Wang Ling's eyes were red and he looked as if he has aged in years. For the first time Xiang Shaolong could clearly feel that he is getting on in age, something that he has never felt before in the past and this made him very uncomfortable.

He came towards Xiang Shaolong and said quietly, "His Highness refused to see us, he only said to wait until you come. I think you'd better go in and see him first before

summoning us in!”

Lao Ai was obviously eavesdropping at the side and said in pique, “This is the time where everyone should have a good discussion. How can his Highness lock himself up, let me go in together with Shaolong.”

A look of ire was seen on everyone’s face.

Xiang Shaolong patted Lao Ai and said somberly, “Let me go in first and find out what’s happening on everyone’s behalf! His Highness is feeling exactly what we are feeling right now, so everyone should sympathize.”

No matter how imperious Lao Ai is, he will not dare to offend Xiang Shaolong for now so he gave up the idea and said, “We will wait here then! But the Dowager should be here soon as well.”

Xiang Shaolong was disgusted to hear him bringing out Zhu Ji’s name in less than a few sentences and went into the library.

Xiao Pan was looking out the window with his back to the door, not moving at all.

Before Xiang Shaolong could speak, Xiao Pan said calmly, “Our men got there a step too late, and the fiend’s nefarious plan succeeded.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect that not only is Xiao Pan not showing any sign of sadness at all, he is even calmer than normal and was struck speechless at that moment.

Xiao Pan turned around and said with a slight smile, "I've just given orders for Cheng Qiao and Du Bi to lead an army and attack immediately. You can tell them later when you go out that I am suddenly taken ill because of my distraught over Wang Chi's death. That Lao Ai will certainly send Mao Jiao here on pretense of treating my illness to check if it's true. We can then make use of Mao Jiao's mouth to trick Lao Ai."

Xiang Shaolong asked in shock, "Is Lu Buwei and Lao Ai really collaborating?"

This is something that has never been mentioned in history books!

Xiao Pan said with a frosty smile, "The Dowager wants me to appoint Lao Ai as the Marquis of Changxin, to be on the same status as Lu Buwei and Lu Buwei did not raise objections at all. So what do you think has happened?"

He paused and added, "Time and again I've wanted to summon Wang Jian back but Lu Buwei and Lao Ai joined forces to stop me. Without the Dowager's permission, there's nothing that I, as the ruler, is allowed to do. Now our troops are all tied up fighting in the other 3 states. Other than the three main armies in Xianyang, we're only left with the reinforcement troops and the total manpower is only about 120,000 men, totally powerless to mount a military expedition against Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. So I can only feign illness to lure them here to attack and let Teacher take care of them. Other than this, there's really no other way."

Xiang Shaolong sighed, "Your Highness have indeed grown up."

Xiao Pan looked heavenward and sighed, "Ever since Mother was killed, circumstances forced me to do all these. There will be no mercy or reason to speak of."

Xiang Shaolong sighed together with him and left the library. When everyone started surrounding him, Xiang Shaolong exclaimed, "His Highness has taken ill!"

Xiao Pan's 'illness' lasted three whole months and the morning court sessions was handled by Zhu Ji.

Xiang Shaolong and Huan Qi stepped up on the conscription efforts and increased the numbers of the reinforcement troops to 50,000 men and spent their days training the soldiers outside the city. They also imagined the route that Cheng Qiao would take and strengthened the defenses and communication along the route.

By the time the snow melted, news have arrived that once Cheng Qiao heard that his 'elder brother' was taken seriously ill, not only did he disobey orders to attack Shangtang but tried to strike a deal with the Zhaos, asking Du Bi to gather 150,000 men to quietly avoid the cities along the way and go straight at Xianyang.

Cheng Qiao's rebel troops took the boats and arrived at the north of Xianyang first before sneaking their way to Xianyang.

Xiang Shaolong has been keeping a close watch on their

activities and transferred 20,000 cavalry in the night, together with 50,000 reinforcement troops and set up a trap at an ideal, prearranged location for Cheng Qiao's army.

On top of that he let out fake information that Xianyang's troops have gone to Zuicheng for military practice.

Therefore when news of Cheng Qiao's army approaching emerged, the whole of Xianyang was alarmed.

At this time Xiao Pan really needs to lie down in bed and only a few trusted aides like Lord Changping, Li Si etc knows what is truly happening.

Lao Ai and Zhu Ji were obviously at a loss. This obviously means that they are not aware that Cheng Qiao and Du Bi will raise an army and rebel openly.

Lu Buwei is still hiding at Bashu, so that others will not know what he is up to but no matter what, it won't be anything good.

The chaos in Xianyang will naturally be relayed to Cheng Qiao and Du Bi by spies so that it will make them belittle their opponents and grow careless.

It's difficult to blame them, who would have guessed that the future Emperor Qin would know 4 months ago that they will rebel?

Dealing with a veteran general like Du Bi, it's impossible to set up an ambush anywhere. Because he'll certainly have vanguards to ensure that the roads ahead are safe before the main military force will follow behind.

But Xiang Shaolong also has his own brilliant strategy.

He split his army into half, with Huan Qi and Jing Jun leading 20,000 men and hiding at a secret location outside Xianyang city.

He and Teng Yi will lead the remaining 50,000 elite troops and hide somewhere far away in a dense forest, away from the route that Cheng Qiao's army will take and quietly wait for their prey to arrive.

The weather is good this day. Cheng Qiao's vanguards arrived about 100 miles north of Xianyang city and because they heard news that the defending troops won't be leaving the gates to meet the enemy but will only try to defend the city to their deaths, Cheng Qiao and Du Bi did not especially fortify their defenses.

At this point in time Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were amongst some bushes about 5 miles away at the top of the hill, looking at the enemy troops snaking through the valleys magnificently.

Teng Yi said with a laugh, "If Lu Buwei knows that Cheng Qiao is now rallying his forces to attack under the excuse of 'Eliminating Lu and Lao to save his Imperial Brother', he'll definitely be so incensed that he'll vomit blood and die."

Xiang Shaolong took a careful look at the magnificent and tidy forces with the brightly polished armor and banners fluttering in the wind. He shook his head and said, "I think Lu Buwei has already guessed that Cheng Qiao is immature. That's why he is deliberately making use of Cheng Qiao's



hands to eliminate his Highness and us, and to get rid of Lao Ai and the Dowager. Then he can summon the two big armies led by Guan Zhongxie and the Meng brothers and get rid of Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. By then he can take the throne for himself.”

Teng Yi guffawed, “Third Brother really knows this conniving thief well but when it comes to trickery, other than Third Brother, no one else is his match.”

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, “But this time it’s more accurate to say that Lu Buwei is not his Highness’s match.”

Teng Yi sighed, “He’s finally grown up.”

At this time Zhou Liang came with Eagle King to report that the enemy’s backup force is finally passing by.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the time has come and on his command, all the riders moved out and making use of the cover of the dense forest, flowed closely on the tail of the enemy troops.

Their plan is very precise. When the enemy is resting and starting to build the fire to cook, this will be the time for them to surround them.

Cheng Qiao’s main force indeed was not worried about the enemy attacking and actually set up camp at a hill where the official road to Xianyang goes past. On both sides, there were tall and dense trees and the tents of 50,000 men filled up the entire hill.

Before they have a chance to place a scout at the tallest

point, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi's 50,000 elite troops have already arrived silently through the forest.

Xiang Shaolong is after all someone who has undergone strict military training and knows that in such a situation, there is no place for mercy at all. He hardened his heart and gave orders to eliminate all enemies and while there's still a little light from the setting sun, thoroughly surrounded the enemy's 50,000 men and waited for the chance to attack.

As the eastern sky started to turn bright, the enemy soldiers started to wake up and move around. They were talking and joking loudly as they prepared to cook breakfast.

Xiang Shaolong gave the command and the drums started beating as 50,000 elite cavalry charged out of the dense forest and launched a full force attack.

This has turned into a massacre where the enemy had no chance to retaliate at all.

The enemy soldiers threw down their rice bowls and did not even have time to get their horses before trying to escape on their own.

After a few charges, the backup enemy force has totally disintegrated as all of them are running around on barefoot trying to save their own lives.

The defeat of the backup troops immediately impacted on the nearly 90,000 main force. They were about to turn back and give support when Huan Qi and Jing Jun, each leading 10,000 elite cavalry sandwiched them from the left and

right. Cheng Qiao's army was being attacked from the front and back and they were totally flabbergasted.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi came upon them forcefully from the back and with just a single charge, Cheng Qiao's army was immediately thrown into a crazy and chaotic situation.

Cheng Qiao and Du Bi have now become public enemy, as thousands of soldiers surrounded them.

Xiang Shaolong, holding his Hundred Battles Blade, led the way as he charged into the enemy's formation and personally killed Du Bi. At the same time he followed Xiao Pan's orders and dealt with Cheng Qiao on the spot, getting rid of this source of trouble.

In this battle, only about 10,000 odd of Xiang Shaolong's men were injured or dead and can be considered an extremely outstanding battle outcome.

About 40,000 of Cheng Qiao's rebel soldiers were killed while the remaining 80,000 who did not manage to escape all surrendered.

Xiang Shaolong waited until the next morning before ordering his men to send the report to Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was ecstatic as he personally led his men to come and commend the army.

That night he stayed in Xiang Shaolong's Commander's tent.

After dinner, Xiao Pan was in a good mood and climbed up with everyone to the high point to admire the magnificent

and mysterious scenery of the wilderness under the moonlight.

This future Emperor Qin was especially elated and asked with a laugh, "Who will help me exterminate Pu Hu's faction?"

As soon as Xiang Shaolong heard the word 'exterminate', he thought of Shan Rou who is far away in Qi, his heart shuddered and he dared not reply at all.

Jing Jun, Teng Yi and Huan Qi regarded Xiang Shaolong as their leader and since he did not say anything, they maintained their silence as well.

Wang Ling took a step forward and answered with a cold snort, "Leave this matter to me then!"

Everyone, including Xiao Pan, was taken aback.

Because of his grief over Wang He's death, Wang Ling's health has been extremely bad and just the torturous journey of following the army may prove too strenuous for him.

Besides, Pu Hu's remaining power is still very considerable and he will never sit still and be captured. On top of that, he is very close to the Zhaos, so this matter may look very easy on the surface but in fact it's very difficult.

Wang Ling have not led an army for many years and now he is asking for permission to go is prove of his determination to avenge Wang He.

Xiao Pan greatly regretted his words but now that Wang Ling has made the request, if he rejects it will mean that he finds him too old for such a task and that, to a Qin, is the greatest humiliation.

Xiao Pan had no choice but pretend to be elated and said, "Then I will appoint Great General Wang as the Commander with General Huan Qi as the Deputy Commander. Both of you will leave as soon as possible."

Wang Ling and Huan Qi hurriedly knelt down to receive the imperial edict.

Xiao Pan said solemnly, "The success or failure of this battle will depend on speed, and catch Pu Hu totally unaware. Otherwise if we allow him to stay safely behind Dunliu City, and with the Zhaos backing him up, this matter will prove extremely difficult."

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

More and more, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to feel this future Emperor Qin's superior talent and stratagem. And he is better than him in the way that he cares only about the outcome and will never be concerned about feelings or loyalty. Only a hard-hearted person like this will be able to become the world's most fearsome leader in this warring states era.

They returned to the tent and Xiao Pan looked for Xiang Shaolong for a private discussion.

Xiao Pan said with a wry smile, "I'm very worried about

Wang Ling, afraid that he won't be able to survive the hardship of a military campaign."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he feeling a little peeved that he had not volunteered first and replied with a sigh, "What do you want me to do?"

Xiao Pan sighed, "I can blame anyone, but I will never dare to blame Teacher. Before I rode here, I did think of the idea of eliminating Lu and Lao's factions totally once I return to the capital. When Lu Buwei comes back, he will be executed immediately right outside the city gates and get it over and done with. Does Teacher think this plan is workable?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "This is a dangerous move. Firstly we have no excuse to do this, and Lu and Lao's factions are too big and strong. Just their family warriors added up makes up almost 20,000 men and there's absolutely a lot of people to get rid of. Besides Guan Zhongxie is still outside with his army and the city troops are under their command. On top of that we have that problematic Pu Hu. Our military power in Xianyang will be even more stretched out. Your Highness, you must reconsider."

Xiao Pan was vexed, "I know as well that this is not the best time, but do I have to wait until after the coronation before I can strike? Now I find that waiting another two more days is already too long a wait, not to mention another two years."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Those who wants to achieve big things must learn tolerance. If Lu Buwei hears any rumors on this, with his influence and tricks, maybe he will be able to

encourage Bashu to rebel and that is certainly not a good thing for Great Qin. Besides, he should already be well prepared by now, so that he can fight for the throne with Cheng Qiao once Cheng Qiao's uprising is successful. If we choose this time to strike, Qin will be thrown into chaos."

Xiao Pan nodded his head in agreement and said after a moment's silence, "How can we summon Wang Jian back?"

Xiang Shaolong replied, "It'll be just before your Highness's coronation ceremony! By then your Highness will soon have absolute power and no one will dare question your orders. By then, you can just give a secret imperial edict and this matter will be accomplished."

An icy cold light flashed past Xiao Pan's eyes as he said, "We'll do just that. I want those conniving thieves to be caught unaware when Wang Jian returns and by then I'll make sure they get their comeuppance."

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a moment before he suddenly said in a low voice, "Xiao Pan! I want you to promise Xiang Shaolong one thing."

Xiao Pan's body trembled. Ever since they came to Qin, this is the first time that Xiang Shaolong called him Xiao Pan, and addressed himself as Xiang Shaolong.

His eyes filled with deep feelings, Xiao Pan nodded his head, "Teacher, please speak, Xiao Pan is listening."

Xiang Shaolong said solemnly, "No matter what happens in future, you must treat the Dowager kindly."

Xiao Pan was stunned for a moment. He lowered his head and pondered over this for a while before replying emphatically, "Xiao Pan will never dare disobey Teacher's orders. But this will only be limited to Imperial Mother, all others will not be included."

Xiang Shaolong knows that he is determined to kill the two children that Zhu Ji had borne for Lao Ai. He also knows that it's very difficult for him to interfere in such matters so he can only answer with a wry smile, "All right, your Highness!"

Xiao Pan came closer, his hands clasped Xiang Shaolong's shoulders and pulled him in for an embrace, and cried out frantically, "Teacher! Please do not leave Xiao Pan! Don't you want to witness for yourself how Xiao Pan will unify the world and establish the best dynasty that has never been seen in centuries past?"

Xiang Shaolong turned his arms and held him tightly, saying sadly, "Teacher will have to leave and you have to destroy all written mention about me as well so that I will not leave a trace in history. This is fate. Even if I don't tell you to do all these, you will ultimately do so anyway."

Xiao Pan was taken aback and moved back a little, looking at him morosely, "How can this happen, I will never do that, no one should forget about Teacher's great and meritorious contributions."

Xiang Shaolong calmed down and grabbing his broad shoulders, he exclaimed, "Ever since I first saw you at the Zhao Palace, I've always regarded you as my son. Seeing you



grow up and becoming an adult, even turning into the most powerful leader in the world, the contentment I feel in my heart is really indescribable. But precisely because of this relation, I will have to leave you. On one hand it's because I have fulfilled my promise to your mother, to groom her son into a talent. On the other hand I want to pursue my own life and dreams. Only after I leave will you be able to totally cut off all the relationships in your past and go freely to pursue your own dreams, do you understand? We must never have this discussion again in future."

For a moment, Xiao Pan's eyes reddened, like a child totally in awe with his father as he laid his head on his broad chest and spoke no further.

## CHAPTER 10

## Heartfelt Words

[Translated by JEAN]

THREE DAYS LATER, Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong and the rest returned to the capital.

The Dowager, with Lao Ai, led all the court officials out to welcome them.

Looking at their expressions, Zhu Ji's joy is one that comes from the heart while Lao Ai's smiling face looked quite strained.

Lao Ai is not an idiot, in fact he's a very cunning and

despicable man. Naturally he knows that he's an outcast among the Crown Prince's political group.

The day that the Crown Prince gets coroneted will be the day the Dowager Zhu Ji loses her governing power, and it will be the time where he will lose all authority.

Xiang Shaolong has once again stabilized Xianyang. He is the most able leader in the military, helping Xiao Pan strengthen his hold on his throne. Once he gets rid of Pu Hu, what is left is only Lu and Lao's factions.

But over the last 10 years, Lu Buwei has been concentrating on growing his supporting faction and privately using people for his own ends so his influence is something that should not be belittled.

Xianyang may be the capital city but it still needs the support of the surrounding counties in many areas.

The local militia at the capital reports to the Chief Commandant. The Magistrate only takes care of administrative matters while the Chief Commandant is in charge of military affairs. Theoretically the military should be under the sole control of the ruler and sometimes the ruler will give orders to mobilize the troops. As for military supplies and conscription, each family will be taxed according to headcount in the family and all men, once they have reached a certain age will have to be conscripted into the army for two years; one year as active servicemen and another year as garrison soldiers to guard the borders, and they are called the Standing Army.

On top of that there are professional soldiers, who have become the main force of Great Qin.

Lu Buwei took the opportunity when repairing the Zhengguo Canal to obtain the authority to mobilize the local standing armies and this has helped him strengthen his power and control in local areas. This situation where Lu Buwei had absolute control was only broken after the birth of the Black Dragon and Xiao Pan's establishment of the Three Lords and Nine Ministers system.

But Lu Buwei has already established his own local bases during the early years. So if there is a rebellion, he'll be even more difficult to deal with compared to Cheng Qiao or Lao Ai.

So he's not worried about Cheng Qiao succeeding in usurping the throne at all, because by then he can rally his troops using the excuse of crushing the rebel forces.

But even in his wildest dreams would he never imagine that he is up against the rarest and ultimate ruler in all of China's history, the most formidable Emperor Qin.

After their return to Xianyang, it is customary to pray to the ancestors first followed by a feast.

The next morning, after the court session, Zhu Ji summoned Xiang Shaolong to Sweet Spring Palace.

Xiang Shaolong had no other choice but to brace himself to see Zhu Ji.

This powerful Dowager whose reputation is declining day by

day in Qin received him at the side hall in the inner palace. After she dismissed the maids, Zhu Ji said with a solemn expression, "The Marquis of Changxin, Lao Ai, said that he was totally not involved at all in this mission to quell the rebels. Even I, as the Dowager, was kept in the dark. What is this all about? It made us all worry for nothing."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly thinking to himself who don't she go and ask her own son instead of interrogating him.

But of course he won't say it out loud. Instead he answered respectfully, "The administrative and military matters are kept separate, it's quite normal that the Marquis of Changxin won't know of this matter."

Zhu Ji stared at him, displeased, "Then why is the Chief Commandant not aware of this as well? Han Xie didn't even know you've gone out of the city into battle and so he was unable to coordinate with you at all."

After Guan Zhongxie left for the military expedition, Han Xie was promoted as the Commander with Xu Shang as his deputy.

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "We could emerge victorious this time because of the four words 'take them by surprise', and in order to become legendary troops, we must have various tricks to confuse the enemy and let the enemy obtain wrong information. As our enemy has a lot of ears and eyes in the capital, we have to use extreme methods and I hope your Majesty will understand."

Zhu Ji was quiet for a moment before saying with a sad sigh,

“Please don’t use such pretentious words on me? Zheng’er and you can hide it from everyone else but how can you lie to me? If both of you did not want the Marquis of Changxin to find out, I will not tell him.”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect Zhu Ji to suddenly talk to him with such a tone of voice and attitude and the old feelings he kept hidden deeply welled up as he sighed and said, “The Crown Prince is growing day by day, he’s no longer the child of the past. Now he is most concerned about how to govern the country well and unify the world. Any obstacle on this path of his will be cleared by him sooner or later. This is the road that all rulers must go through as they mature and this is something very clearly stated in history.”

Zhu Ji’s pretty face suddenly paled as she asked in alarm, “Shaolong, what do you mean by those words, is Zheng’er going to deal with me?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that she is having a guilty conscience because she has bore two bastards for Lao Ai and answered with a wry smile, “Of course his Highness won’t be so unfilial towards your Majesty, but to other people, there’s no need for him to be filial at all. Regardless of foster father or fake father, they’re all the same.”

Zhu Ji looked at him at a loss, and lowered her head to ask, “Tell Zhu Ji, will Xiang Shaolong deal with her?”

A surge of feelings welled in Xiang Shaolong as he said with certainty, “Even if someone puts a sword at my neck, I will never harm the Dowager.”

Zhu Ji asked quietly, "What about the Marquis of Changxin?"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback for a moment before he answered in a tone that even he himself found to be sarcastic, "If he is loyal towards the Dowager and the Crown Prince, I can guarantee that nothing will happen to him."

Of course fate would not end up like that.

The rebellion of Lao Ai is the last internal struggle just before Emperor Qin's coronation and Lu Buwei will be implicated because of this and return to the north defeated.

Suddenly, he knows that he has become an important person who can affect the political scene in the Qin empire, that's why Zhu Ji had to lower herself to ask this question and to seek his opinion.

And he has become the only person that Xiao Pan will totally trust.

Even when he released Han Chuang, Xiao Pan did not take it to heart. If it was someone else, he would have ended up being removed from his post or dragged out to be executed.

Zhu Ji's body trembled slightly as she raised her head, seemingly going to speak but stopping herself.

Xiang Shaolong said gently, "Is there anything else that your Majesty wants to ask me?"

Zhu Ji exclaimed piteously, "Tell me, what I should do?"

Xiang Shaolong understood the meaning behind those words, which is to say that she has lost control over Lao Ai

and is not feeling guilt-ridden.

After all, Xiao Pan is her 'son' and although their relationship has been deteriorating, she has not come to the extent whereby she will deliberately harm her son with her lover.

And all Lao Ai wants is to retain his power.

But anyone would know this is impossible. When Xiao Pan holds absolute power, Lao Ai's only outcome is to fade out.

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a while, knowing that if he does not take this opportunity to speak his mind, he'll never have the chance in future. As to whether Zhu Ji is willing to listen to his advice, that's her problem.

He stood up and moved to the front of Zhu Ji's table and knelt down on one knee, looking at her well maintained, dewy and beautiful face, saying frankly, "If your Majesty is willing to listen to my advice, return power to his Highness earlier and bring the Minister of Ceremony with you to live in Yongdu for good. That way, the conflict between your Majesty and his Highness will be dissolved."

Zhu Ji's delicate body trembled again as she cried out softly, "Shaolong, I..."

Footsteps were heard from behind.

The both of them turned around to look in surprise, only to see Lao Ai barging in, his eyes fury with jealousy as he stared angrily at both of them.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed.



Fate makes fun of men. In the end, there's still nothing he can do to change the situation.

When he returned to the Wu residence, the angry and venomous look in Lao Ai's eyes still haunts his mind.

Rome was not built in a day. So Lao Ai's jealousy towards him is not something that just started today.

He's the kind of person who thinks that all the women in the world should rightfully fall in love with him, someone who only takes but never gives. Compared to him, Lu Buwei's tactics are indeed a lot more brilliant.

On a certain level, Xiao Pan can still reluctantly accept Lu Buwei as a foster father but he will never acknowledge Lao Ai as his fake father.

Just based on this point alone, Lao Ai has already planted the seed of his own demise.

History has long proven that all those rulers who founded a dynasty are definitely vicious and without mercy. Xiao Pan, the Emperor of Qin, is the best of them all.

When he killed Zhao Mu with his own hands, his eyes were shining brightly as he reported to Xiang Shaolong. At that time, he could already identify Xiao Pan's bravery and he was just a 15 year old boy then.

This time, he set up a trap to kill Cheng Qiao and Du Bi and at the same time ordered his men to get rid of Pu Hu. From this, his attention to details and his merciless nature can be seen.

Of course, this is also due to his background and the incidents that had befallen him.

Just as his mind was wandering with all these information, he had already arrived at the Wu family's gates with his bodyguards.

A horse carriage was parked at the square and a few of Qin Qing's family warriors were idly chatting with the Wu family's guards. When they saw him coming, they paid their respects.

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic as he jumped down his horse and shouted, "Is Grand Tutor Qin back."

One of them replied, "She just arrived this morning."

A fiery ball of love welled in Xiang Shaolong's heart as he ran into the house. When he got to the grand hall, the beauty that he has been thinking of day and night, dressed in a simple gown, was chatting happily with Ji Yanran and the other ladies, including Shan Lan, Zhou Wei and the children. On seeing Xiang Shaolong, Qin Qing's pretty eyes brightened immediately with an indescribable fire as her delicate body trembled lightly but her expression remained calm. Obviously she was trying to control herself. Wu Tingfang said with a laugh, "Sister Qing pines for one of us, so she came back earlier."

Qin Qing's pretty face blushed immediately as she gave Wu Tingfang an angry stare, her expression extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong suppressed his urge to gather her into his

arms as he came between her and Zhao Zhi and said with a laugh, "Grand Tutor Qin has lost weight, but looks even more alluring now." Qin Qing replied happily, "Qin Qing may not be in Xianyang but Great General's reputation still rings loudly like thunder. What luck that my return this time coincides with Great General's victorious homecoming as well."

Shan Lan said with a laugh, "Both of you can stop pretending. It's all our own people here, must you behave so politely towards each other."

Ji Yanran helped Qin Qing out of the situation by changing the topic and telling Xiang Shaolong, "Sister Qing said that Lu Buwei went to her hometown. He was trying his utmost to get into the good books of the major local clans. What is most shameless is that the suggestion to reduce taxes came from Li Si but he boasted that it was his idea."

Zhou Wei added, "What's even more irritating is that he came on many occasions to bother Sister Qing and Sister Qing was so alarmed that she had to move somewhere else to stay."

Xiang Shaolong said with a smile, "Because he made a wrong calculation, thinking that Cheng Qiao would be able to get rid of us so there's no more need for him to control himself."

He went nearer to Qin Qing and said, "We'll return to the farm tomorrow, is Grand Tutor Qin willing to dawdle around like this for the rest of your life?"

Qin Qing blushed right to her ears and pouted, "Your official

posts are getting bigger and bigger but you're getting naughtier. I'm not talking to you, I still have to go and see the Dowager and the Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong grabbed her small shoulders without any hesitation and whispered in her ears, "I don't care where Grand Tutor Qin is going now, but Grand Tutor must come back here tonight to spend the night."

Wu Tingfang was listening intently to their conversation and on hearing his words, said with a smile, "Sister Qing has already agreed, but she's going to chat with us sisters through the night instead. Hee hee, sorry about that, Great General."

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head, "That's even more ideal."

The ladies all reprimanded him with a laugh.

By this time, Xiang Shaolong has cast all thoughts of Zhu Ji, Lao Ai and all the fights with his enemies behind him.

At this moment, life is good. His mind flew to the thoughts of the open plains and he remembered the wide open grassland that he once went to in the 21st century while undergoing training. Blue skies, white clouds, green grass as lush as carpets spans the entire horizon, the lakes look like clear mirrors adorning the landscape with the rivers interjecting one another with the smell of clean grass filled the air. If he can spend the rest of this weird and wonderful life in peace with his wives and beloved children in this farm surrounded by nature, with no need to bother about mundane fights for power and war, how wonderful would

life be?

The next day, he returned to the farm with his own and Teng Yi's families, and of course Qin Qing was with them. The both of them were pining for each other after being separated for so long and now is no longer bothered about how others sees them.

Ten days later, Wang Ling and Huan Qi gathered an army of 100,000 men to attack Tunliu and Pu Hu, under the pretext of avenging Cheng Qiao abandoned Qin and allied with Zhao. Wang Bi and Yang Duanhe were beaten back by Li Mu on numerous occasions and they changed their tactics to be on the defensive and managed to stabilize the various eastern commanderies and their situation was extremely dangerous. At the same time, King Heng Hui of Han died of illness and the Crown Prince ascended the throne. Han Chuang has always been on good terms with the Crown Price so he now became the Premier, becoming the most influential man in Han. Lord Longyang's power in Wei greatly increased as well and the two states relied on each other, working hand in hand to repel Qin, suppressing the eastern advancement of the two armies led by Guan Zhongxie and the Meng brothers.

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi are leading carefree lives at the farm. There's still about two more years to go before Xiao Pan's coronation. But during this period of time, which is not so far away in the future, no one can guess what changes will happen in the meantime.

On this day, Lord Wenchang and Li Si came together to the farm to visit them. Naturally all of them were happy to see one another again.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi led the both of them on a leisurely horse ride at dusk when Lord Wenchang commented, "Lu Buwei just came back, his relationship with Lao Ai is noticeably better and they will occasionally go and have drinks together at Drunken Wind Loft. He even let Lao Ai have Bai Yaya."

Li Si said icily, "In my opinion he's trying to repeat the devious trick he used on Cheng Qiao, which is to incite Lao Ai to rebel. Maybe he even hinted openly that he will support the bastard son he had with the Dowager to ascend the throne, then get rid of Lao Ai after that and make himself king. As Lu Buwei is still very powerful on the ground, it's possible that this is something he can accomplish."

Lord Changping added, "But there's one thing which is quite strange. After Shaolong left, the Dowager went to speak with the Crown Prince and offered to hand over part of her authority and after that will live in seclusion in Yongdu. Lao Ai is now making frequent trips between Yongdu and Xianyang but some important decisions or deployment of people still needs the Dowager's agreement before it can proceed."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly relieved that at least Zhu Ji is willing to listen to his advice, resulting in improved relations between her and Xiao Pan.

Teng Yi asked, "Is there any news from Mao Jiao's side?"

Lord Changping replied with a cold snort, "He said Lao Ai is at Yong Du cultivating talents. There's something that all of you are unaware, Ling Qi has become Yongdu's castellan. The Grand Temple is situated at Yongdu, so it's under Lao Ai's jurisdiction. It can be effectively considered that Yongdu is now under his control."

Xiang Shaolong already knew long ago that Lao Ai will certainly try to gather resources first, otherwise he won't be able to start a rebellion.

Teng Yi asked about Wang Ling and Huan Qi's battle situation.

Li Si replied with a sigh, "His Highness is still worried. Pu Hu's has retreated back to Tunliu and is staying behind the walls, refusing to come out. There's nothing Great General Wang can do to him for now. What's most worrying is that winter is fast approaching and it's a time that will benefit the defenders and not the besiegers. Besides, there's also the existence of Li Mu, he's an uncertain factor."

Lord Changping sighed, "I don't know if it's intentional on Lu Buwei's part, using the excuse that the building of the Zhengguo Canal will be completed soon and he redeployed a large number of men locally to build the canal, with the result that we now don't have many soldiers to deploy. We were just vexing over this matter."

Xiang Shaolong can't help but feel a sense of guilt. If he had agreed to Xiao Pan's request to lead the army against Tunliu

that day, Wang Ling won't have to make such a torturous journey in his old age.

A pity that this has already become an unalterable fact.

A feeling of misfortune welled up in his heart.



## CHAPTER 11

## Devising Strategies

[Translated by JEAN]

A MONTH after Lord Changping and Li Si's visit to the farm, Xiang Shaolong's feeling of misfortune was proven correct.

Li Mu's elite troops suddenly arrived and greatly defeated the Qin army outside Tunliu. Wang Ling and Huan Qi retreated in haste about a hundred miles northwest of Tunliu, to Changzi City situated at the end of Lushui, having lost close to 30,000 men.

Wang Ling was filled with worry and anger and on top of that was overly exhausted. Two days after they arrived at

Changzi City, he died of illness.

Of the four Great Generals who were around when the Black Dragon was born, only Wang Jian is left. Meng Ao, Wang Chi and Wang Ling all passed away within two years and this is an extremely heavy blow to the Qins.

Now, the only famous generals left in Qin are Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian.

The rest like Huan Qi, Meng Wu, Meng Tian, Yang Rui, Guan Zhongxie etc, have not reached the stage where they can hold the fort on their own.

For now, Qin's grand plan of invading towards the east has temporarily come to a standstill.

If not for Xiang Shaolong who had defeated the coalition army and suppressed the uprising led by Cheng Qiao and Du Bi, maybe the Qin royalty would have to learn from the Chus and move away to avoid further trouble.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were summoned back to Xianyang. As they do not want their wives and children to take the arduous journey back, they advised them to stay behind at the farm.

Ji Yanran and the rest are already used to them leaving their homes to go on military expeditions but as their opponent this time is the trickiest and most famous general of this era, Li Mu, the ladies had to keep nagging and warning them before they allowed them to leave for Xianyang.

As usual, Xiang Shaolong went straight to the palace to see

Xiao Pan while Teng Yi went to see their fifth brother Jing Jun, whom they have not met for a long time.

Xiao Pan met him alone in the pace and his expression was somber. When he saw him, he said, "This time, Wang Ling's death is caused by Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "Really?"

Xiao Pan placed his hands on the table, the frosty glance that flashed past his eyes was enough to make even Xiang Shaolong's heart run cold. This future Emperor Qin gave a cold snort, "I've already considered the possibility of the Zhaos helping in the besiege of Tunliu long ago and have given orders to Guan Zhongxie to attack the Zhaos and keep Li Mu engaged. However Lu Buwei made unreasonable objections and with the support of Lao Ai, there were numerous delays which eventually resulted in the defeat of Tunliu. I will certainly settle this score clearly with them in future."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Are they in a position to interfere in these matters?"

Xiao Pan answered angrily, "Of course not. I can only hate myself for once promising the Dowager that if for any redeployment of troops amounting to more than 100,000 men, I will need her seal of approval. According to Mai Jiao, Lao Ai deliberately ordered his men to delay the documents that I sent to the Dowager, so that it only reached her hands 10 days later. These documents were delayed for another 2 weeks on the way back. By that time, things have already

happened what whatever military advantage we may have is already affected. After that, I tried to pursue this matter but the Dowager kept protecting Lao Ai. Great General Wang has died a meaningless death.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a wry smile, “So the Dowager listened to my advice and moved to Yongdu, but ended up with such side effects.”

Xiao Pan shook his head, “This is not your fault. The problem lies with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. As long as these two are still around, we can forget about unifying the world. Ever since time memorial, one will have to govern internal affairs well before expanding outwards. Now that our internal strife are abound, how can we take over the 6 states and accomplish the grandest achievement of all times.” He paused and added, “Now our opponent is Lu Mu and it seems that we are defeated at every battle. As long as this person is not removed, we can forget about attacking Handan.”

Xiang Shaolong asked, “Is the power in Zhao now still in the hands of the Dowager Han Jing?”

Xiao Pan replied, “The current King of Zhao is even worse than King Xiaocheng. He’s constantly engaged in wine and women and he’s overly suspicious and prone to jealousy as well. Humph, no one knows him better than me. One day he will die in the hands of a woman and this day is not far away. No matter how smart and formidable Han Jing is, she is still a woman and only knows how to pine over Guo Kai and let this scumbag take over the court proceedings and interfere

in military matters. If not for that, Li Mu may very well have fought his way here long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, “Weren’t there rumors that Pang Nuan is Han Jing’s gigolo?”

Xiao Pan is especially hateful of the Zhaos and said with disdain, “Han Jing is a \*\*\*\* who breaks all the rules of the palace so it’s nothing strange if she has found a few more men.”

He sighed and added, “I’m really unwilling to let Teacher lead an army to Tunliu but there’s really no one else more suitable. And this is what Lu Buwei and Lao Ai really hope for.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled, “Your Highness, why do you say that?”

It seems that Xiao Pan dared not face him. He walked towards the window and looked at the snowy imperial garden outside and said slowly with his back to him, “Because I understand the relationship between Teacher and Li Mu. So unless Teacher promise me that you will not harbor any personal feelings, otherwise I will not allow Teacher to lead the army no matter what happens. Because Li Mu is not the likes of Pang Nuan or Han Chuang, if Teacher feels even a tiny inkling of sympathy, you will certainly be defeated.”

Xiang Shaolong was so taken aback that he was at a loss for words.

Just like how well he understands Xiao Pan, Xiao Pan is totally familiar with his thoughts as well.

Lord Changping suggested, “Why don’t we go and look for Li Si to discuss this?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and took his leave to go to the Cavalry Official Department.

After Teng Yi and Jing Jun heard his updates, Teng Yi said, “His Highness is right, there is no place for personal feelings on the battlefield. Because it’s not a problem involving only two people, but it involves the lives of thousands of soldiers and their wives and children, as well as the fate and pride of a country.”

Xiang Shaolong was startled, “I really didn’t spare that much thought to it.”

Teng Yi was silent for a moment before saying in all seriousness, “I do have a suggestion, which is to immediately select a troop of elite soldiers and gather them at the farm to give them intense training like what we did with our elite warriors. Our family warriors like Jing Shan, Wu Yan etc will be the military leaders and each leader will have 5,000 men under him. In that way, we can mobilize them as easily as moving our arms and we will be able to strike most effectively in battle.”

Xiang Shaolong was energized as he remembered the training methods for the elite troops in the 21st century and happily agreed.

For the next 10 days, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi stayed in the Cavalry Official Department in the capital to personally select 45,000 men from the reinforcement troops, cavalry, city guards and imperial guards. They were split into 9 sections with Jing Shan and the 18 Warriors as the Officers and Deputy Officers and 2 sections will form an army. Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Zhao Da will be the Commanders of the 3 armies while he will personally lead the remaining 2,000 Wu family elite warriors as the Grand Commander with Teng Yi as his deputy. Naturally Zhou Liang will become the leader of the scouting team.

Most of the people were with Xiang Shaolong in his two previous battles and once they heard that he is leading the army, their morale were greatly boosted and they were willing to lay down their lives for this mission.

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were surprisingly cooperative because naturally they were hoping that he would go earlier and die faster so he can never return to Xianyang again.

Therefore Xiang Shaolong sought Xiao Pan's permission to move the entire army to the farm and making use of the various facilities, trained the soldiers day and night, hoping to make use of these 3 bitter winter months before spring arrives to cultivate another massive army of elite soldiers.

On this day, because of the heavy snow, the soldiers were all staying in the farm. Xiang Shaolong was having dinner with his wives and son when Learned Lady Ji commented, "Ultimately, warfare is about the art of trickery. Therefore

the best leader will first strategize to hinder the enemy's plans, next will be the battle on the field and finally to besiege a walled city. So we must pretend to be unable to attack even if we can, and make the enemy believe that we are far away when we are not<sup>23</sup>. Sun Tzu even openly said that nothing is too deceitful in war. Now Yanran has seen how dear husband is training the troops and indeed your methods are refreshing and startling. Especially they way you hide how the battle is fought, nothing on earth can indeed compare to it. But I wonder if dear husband have thought of a strategy to defeat the enemy."

Qin Qing added gently and affectionately, "Yanran's questions are not pointless, Pu Hu's influence is very strong at the eastern commandery and he has made many repairs and modifications to Tunliu before. The city walls are high and the rivers wide. Now he won't be afraid of us attacking him because he'll be able to wait it out and counter out active attacks with passiveness. Now even Wang Ling and Huan Qi, who are well versed in the art of war and had the command of Great Qin's elite soldiers ended up being defeated and had to retreat so it goes to show that Pu Hu is not someone like Zhao Gua and there won't be a loss like that of Changping. On top of that, Li Mu is eyeing us from the sideline. Shaolong you must not just use brute force."

On hearing this, Xiang Shaolong can feel himself sweating. The battle strategy this time will have to attack a strong and walled city and at the same time deal with Li Mu's sudden

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<sup>23</sup> From Sun Tzu's Art of War.



attacks. It's wishful thinking if one thinks that one can win using the normal rules of engagement. The biggest problem now is that Huan Qi is now leading a newly defeated army and he himself does not have enough troops and it's impossible to split up and handle two different battles at the same time. Besides, Pu Hu has always been unfathomable and Li Mu is an extremely experienced talent in mobilizing troops. The outcome of this battle can almost be known without even fighting it.

Wu Tingfang suggested a plan, "Can we send someone to infiltrate inside the city of Tunliu first?"

Ji Yanran replied, "How would the enemy not be on alert against such a trick. Besides Tunliu belonged to the Zhaos and it'll be even more difficult for the Qins to infiltrate."

Xiang Shaolong searched his brains for memories of examples besieging cities from the last thousand years since 'ancient time' to now. He almost fried his brains thinking and couldn't think of any brilliant plan at that moment so he gave up.

After dinner, Xiang Shaolong lied down on the mat with his head resting on Wu Tingfang's soft thighs and started thinking again.

Ji Yanran and the rest dare not disturb his train of thought and accompanied him quietly by the side.

The Tian sisters accompanied Xiang Bao'er back to bed.

The fireplaces in the four corners were all burning so they do

not feel the cold frost outside at all.

Xiang Shaolong thought of the Mohist Addendum, which stated these words ‘the way to attack a city is to surround it on four sides but to leave a corner open to indicate an escape route to lure the enemy into breaking out’. But obviously this is not suited to be used at Tunliu City. Because with Li Mu at the side, he is in no way able to block the entire city.

Basically, it takes only four steps to attack a city, namely to cross the river, attack the city gates and walls, climb over the walls and lastly the battle in the streets and alleys.

But as their enemy has the protection of a moat and they are at a higher location, which is advantageous to them and on top of that, they can easily switch from a defensive position to an offensive one at any time and suddenly launch an attack. So if they follow the normal rules of engagement, their losses will be momentous. If he is Li Mu, he will make use of the time when the Qin army is exhausted to lead an attack. By then, if his army is not wiped out, he’ll have to thank Heavens for it.

So how can he change this situation where they can only act in response?

Too bad Pu Hu does not like wooden horse, otherwise he can re-enact what happened in the west during the Trojan War.

Suddenly he had an idea and he sat up in joy and shouted, “I’ve got it.”

The map was spread open on the mat. Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the rest were all concentrating on it but they still have no idea what tricks Xiang Shaolong have up his sleeve.

Xiang Shaolong pointed at a big city inside the Zhao border named Zhongmou and said, "This city is an important place in the Zhao's northern border and the Zhao Capital is 120 miles north of here while Tunliu is 130 miles northwest of here. Therefore the distance to any of these two places from Zhongmou is roughly the same. But to the east of Zhongmou there is an official road leading to Handan and it'll only take 3 days on a swift horse to reach Handan. If we can take down this city, what do you think will be the reaction of the Zhao King?"

Teng Yi banged the table in admiration, "Of course he'll be terrified that we'll attack his capital. We're all well aware of Guo Kai's standard."

Qin Qing furrowed her brows, "Zhongmou is situated along the borders of Zhao and Wei and have always been tightly guarded. How can it be so easily taken down by you? Besides, at the north of Handan there's another long wall spanning about a hundred miles protecting the capital. The Zhao army has been stationed there for a long time and if your 40,000 odd men were to infiltrate them, it'll really be very dangerous."

Ji Yanran said with a smile, "Lord Husband will definitely have another brilliant plan, Sister Qing please listen on carefully."

Xiang Shaolong smiled at Qin Qing and replied, "Please listen to your husband's explanation." Qin Qing saw that he was addressing himself as her husband and was felt both embarrassed and happy at the same time, and she stared at him in reproach.

Xiang Shaolong said, "This time we're going all out regardless of the consequences. Now Guan Zhongxie is deploying troops to the city of Xuanshi in Han and it's only 80 miles away from Tunliu and about a hundred odd miles to Zhongmou. We might as well get a secret edict from his Highness to go to Xuanshi and take away Guan Zhongxie's military command, taking over his 130,000 men for our own use. That way our forces will be boosted and the best thing is the Zhaos will still think that we will be coming up from the south to Changzi city to meet up with Huan Qi before going on to invade Tunliu. Therefore they will surely concentrate their forces at Shangdang to better deal with us."

Jing Jun said viciously, "Best is we can get rid of Guan Zhongxie at the same time."

Qin Qing commented, "Won't that be the same as forcing Lu Buwei to rebel immediately, don't forget Guan Zhongxie is his beloved son-in-law."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Once we reach Xuanshi, we will split our forces in two, one obvious and one secret to move in so that the Zhaos will think that we are going to Changzi city but in fact we will be crossing the river towards Zhongmou."

We'll catch them unawares and our Wu family's elite warriors will climb over the city walls in the middle of the night. As long as we can seize control of one of the city gates, we'll be able to take over Zhongmou."

Teng Yi nodded his head, "Best is if we can smuggle someone into Handan first and create some rumors to make the people panic. Then the Zhaos will have to summon Li Mu back to protect the Capital and Tunliu won't be that impossible to obtain."

Ji Yanran exclaimed excitedly, "At the same time we have to ask Xiao Bi and Duan He to lead their armies and make a major counter attack to engage Pang Nuan and Sima Shang's two armies. By then Li Mu's summons to leave Tunliu will become a surety."

Xiang Shaolong said, "The most difficult part of this matter is how can we move the troops so far, crossing the river from Xuanshi towards Zhongmou without letting our enemy find out. Otherwise it'll just end up as another long drawn siege attack."

Ji Yanran studied the map and replied, "You can pretend to be going towards Changzi City first and split up your troops once you reach the southern shore of River Lu. From here to Zhongmou, it's all wilderness. As long as the troops move rapidly, even if someone sees them, there won't be enough time for them to inform the city guards of Zhongmou, so the number of men cannot be too big. Also, the light cavalry must go first with their light packs, followed by the foot

soldiers. Zhou Liang's Eagle King can be put to the greatest use in such situations."

At this point in time, everyone was filled with confidence, almost wishing that they can attack Zhongmou immediately.

Teng Yi said, "If we can send 50,000 men to Changzi City to meet up with Huan Qi, our army size will reach almost 120,000 but to take down Tunliu, it's not something that can be accomplished within one or two months. I'm worried that by that time the Zhaos would have figured out our actual force and send troops to attack. With enemies in front and behind us, our situation is still bleary."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Pu Hu is still a merchant at heart, he's just relying on the Zhaos. He only had the guts to rebel because being caught will mean his entire clan getting exterminated. The soldiers in the city are all a motley crew gathered hurriedly so as long as we successfully spread rumors to make them panic and deliberately give them an escape route, I guarantee that Tunliu will fall without a battle and no one will put up a real fight."

Zhao Zhi said, "Their first fear is of course that the Zhaos will abandon them, but what can we use to scare them after that?"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "It's simple, make use of the strategy of villages surrounding a city. Take over all the villages nearby, move the villagers away and make sure Tunliu lose their supply of food and grains. Set up camp outside the city of Tunliu and build various equipments for besieging a city.

Make it look as if we're planning a long haul siege and I guarantee that in less than two weeks, Pu Hu will try to think of a way to slip away."

Jing Jun said with a smirk, "If he doesn't slip away, we'll just launch a damn attack."

Wu Tingfang chided, "Xiao Jun, can you mind your words?" Qin Qing saw that everyone's gaze was on her so she shrugged her dainty shoulders and said, "I've gotten used to it long ago!"

Everyone smiled.

Xiang Shaolong continued, "We'll have to think about the whole plan in more detail and then send someone to inform Xiao Qi, Xiao Bi and Duan He immediately. This matter must be kept absolutely secret, otherwise it won't work if word gets out."

By now, although it's very late into the night, how were Xiang Shaolong and his two brothers able to sleep. After the ladies went to bed, they continued their discussion all the way until dawn before they went on their separate ways to carry out their tasks.

## CHAPTER 12

## False Alarm

[Translated by JEAN]

AFTER having a confirmed plan of action, Xiang Shaolong and the rest changed their training methods and split the army into two groups. 20,000 cavalry were specially trained in undercover and camouflage warfare.

Xiang Shaolong used what he has learnt in the 21st century on this group of cavalry.

In a twinkling of an eye, winter is ending and spring is approaching. Xiao Pan came to send off the troops personally in a ceremony and Xiang Shaolong left for



another military expedition once again.

The army travelled in ships downstream, landing at Wusui and walked towards the northeast straight towards Xuanshi City where Guan Zhongxie is at.

Guan Zhongxie, Lian Jiao, Zhao Pu led their army out of the city to welcome them. Of course they appeared extremely polite on the surface, giving them the respect due to a superior.

Xiang Shaolong asked Wu Guo, Jing Jun and the rest to set up camp outside the city and in order not to incur Guan Zhongxie's suspicions, he only led Teng Yi and a thousand personal guards into the city. Only after they reached the Commander's Residence did they take out Xiao Pan's imperial edict to order Guan Zhongxie to hand over his military token immediately and to return to the Capital to continue his duties.

After Guan Zhongxie read the imperial edict, his countenance changed, "What's the meaning of this, why are there no orders from Premier Lu? And the Dowager's imperial seal is missing from this edict."

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and commented, "Why is General Guan so nervous, his Highness is just being concerned that Lord Guan has been working so hard and stationed outside the pass for the whole year, that's why he's allowing General Guan to return to Xianyang for a short holiday. It's just a simple matter of changing of guards, is there a need to trouble Lord Lu and the Dowager on this?"

At this time Teng Yi saw Lian Jiao moving backwards and hurriedly gave out a command, their accompanying personal guards immediately took out their crossbows and took control of the situation. There's no way Guan Zhongxie will expect Xiang Shaolong to have such a move. He saw him smiling icily with his hand on the sheath of Hundred Battles Blade and knows that one wrong word would mean immediate decapitation. He raised his hand to stop his men from making senseless retaliation and his countenance changed to a pleasant smile as he said, "Great General has reprimanded me well. In fact I was really hoping to go back and see Niangrong too."

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, "We cannot go against a ruler's orders, I am just following instructions. It's great that General Guan is willing to cooperate."

He's not worried that Guan Zhongxie will disobey, unless he wants to rebel immediately. Otherwise this is the only outcome available.

The next day, Xiang Shaolong, on the pretext of sending them off, ordered Jing Jun to ensure that Guan Zhongxie and his 2,000 personal guards were escorted to Wusui and to make sure that they board the ship before he returns to Xuanshi.

By this time Xiang Shaolong has completed the redeployment of Guan's army and the cavalry was increased to 50,000 men, the light infantry had 50,000 men and the heavy artillery forces had 80,000 men and their strength was

immediately boosted.

They trained for another month in Xuanshi before they left Xuanshi and travelled along the river up north towards Changzi City.

They travelled slowly but steadily, making sure that the soldiers get ample rest and maintain their energy at a full level.

When they reached the southern bank of the River Lu, the 180,000-strong army stopped and waited for night to fall.

Huan Qi hurried over on hearing the news and when they met, everyone was filled with both sadness and happiness as they told one another what happened while they were apart. He left with Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Huan Qi, Zhou Liang, Wu Guo, Zhao Da and the rest to the Commander's Residence to hold a meeting.

Huan Qi first reported the situation at Tunliu and analyzed, "Inside Tunliu, there are only about a thousand odd men who are old subordinates of Du Bi and Chang Qiao, the rest are Pu Hu's family warriors and local rebels who were from Zhao. The situation is a little similar to the peasants rebellion which happened a few years ago in the east, they are full of valor but no actual capability. But the biggest problem is Li Mu's 100,000 strong Zhao army stationed at Lu City within the Zhao border 40 miles of Tunliu. They can respond immediately if called for and not only are they a source of support for Tunliu, we also dare not attack Tunliu without reservations." When he spoke of Li Mu, his expression

revealed an underlying fear.

Teng Yi signed and asked, "How did you lose that battle?"

Huan Qi replied painfully, "The way Li Mu fights a battle is like performing a magic trick. Great General and I were already keeping a real close eye on the movements within the Zhao border and planted our scouts far and wide. We did not expect that just after we received the alarm, Li Mu's cavalry has already reached our camp and it was a bright and starry night. Li Mu ordered his men to take over the highlands first and burned the camp with fire arrows. The Tunliu rebel forces took the opportunity to charge out as well, drumming the signal for attack. We could not even last until dawn and were utterly defeated. I led a group of 10,000 men and tried out best to fend off the pursuers, otherwise the number of our casualties will be even higher."

On hearing that, everyone felt a cold chill.

Huan Qi continued agitatedly, "After Great general Wang passed away, I led our very demoralized troops to attack Lu City twice but we were forced back by Li Mu. His strategies are ever changing, his soldiers brave and their training excellent. No wonder his fame can spread so far and wide."

Jing Jun commented, "It doesn't matter how formidable Li Mu is, it's no use if there's a excellent general but no good ruler. Have Xiao Qi sent anyone to check the situation over at Zhongmou?"

Huan Qi's spirit was lifted as he took out a rolled up map and opened it on the table, saying, "I took advantage of the

heavy snow to order my men to scout on the enemy's situation so I'm sure the enemy knows nothing at all. Zhongmou is the Zhao's most important military base outside of Chang City and it originally belonged to the Weis. It only landed in Zhao hands four years ago, so that they have another vital point outside out Chang City, that's why it's very heavily regarded."

After everyone had some discussion, he continued, "There are two groups of Zhao army permanently stationed outside the city, about 10,000 men or so at the north and south to cover each other. Their initial use should be to deal with the Weis. Inside the city there are about 20,000 men guarding it and for a city of Zhao, such numbers are very rare. If anything happens, the soldiers inside the city can come out to provide reinforcements. That's why in the many attempts by the Weis to attack the Zhaos, they have been unable to take over Zhongmou, this important city."

Xiang Shaolong said, "That's why we must surprise them in this battle and take them unawares. Otherwise this batter will be a certain defeat."

Huan Qi said, "The Zhaos have built a hundred odd beacon stations on higher grounds outside the city and there are sentries there day and night. If a huge army were to advance, they will find out even if it's at night. It's very difficult to go under their radar."

Jing Jun tapped his chest and assured them, "Let me be in charge of this. I guarantee that not a single one of those

beacons will be able to sound any alarm.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “Tonight, our 40,000 strong elite cavalry will be split into 4 teams and set off in batches after dark. Jing Jun will lead 10,000 as vanguards to clear the beacons. The other 140,000 men will stay here for three more days before they are split up into two teams of 70,000 men each with one team going towards Changzi and the other towards Zhongmou. The day that Li Mu returns to the capital will be the time that Xiao Qi strikes. Remember to make it look as if it’s going to be a drawn out battle, you must not take the risk to attack the city otherwise Li Mu will advance even though he may look like he’s retreating and a replay of the battle that night will happen. Then this loss will be totally not worth it.”

Huan Qi was taken aback as he replied, “No wonder both the previous Great Generals were so full of praise for Great General Xiang before their deaths. I have not thought of this point at all and when you mentioned it, the thought of it made me break out into a cold sweat immediately.”

Wu Guo said with a smile, “It’s time to eat.” Everyone were laughing and jibing one another. As they left the tent, Xiang Shaolong said to Huan Qi, “After you take over Tunliu, immediately start works on repairing and building up defenses. We will pretend to be defeated by Chang City, situated on the border separating Zhao and Wei before suddenly retreating so that the Zhaos will find it difficult to pursue us.”

Huan Qi was high spirited and totally impressed as he nodded his head.

That night, once it's dark, Zhou Liang released Eagle King. After making sure that there are no hidden enemy scouts, Jing Jun's team consisting of the Wu family's elite warriors set off first and in a short while, the four teams of men set off one after another, travelling slowly on horseback.

By the morning of the third day, the army have reached the dense forest 40 miles away from Zhongmou and set up sentries around them. They waited for night to fall.

Zhongmou City is situated in the middle of the plain, with high and thick city walls. It's indeed a tough and important stronghold for the military. The trees outside the city were cut down so it's really not easy to approach without being seen.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi observed the area for a long time and they both felt discouraged, but couldn't think of any good ideas at all.

All of them dare not start fires for cooking so they survived on dried rations.

By dusk, there was a sudden strong wind and rain started pouring.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest exclaimed that even Heaven is helping them as they set off immediately.

Wu Guo and Zhou Liang each led an army to attack the Zhao camp outside the city.

Jing Jun led a thousand We family fighters, crossed the moat and climbed over the walls into the city.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi's main force of 20,000 men went towards the hiding point nearest to the city to get ready for the city gates to open so that they can charge in.

The rain was getting heavier with the occasional thunder and lightning. Visibility was low and the thunders also covered the sounds of the horses hooves totally.

Jing Jun's thousand-strong elite troops tied up their warhorses outside the city and took more than two hours to cross the moat and begin climbing up the walls.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi were waiting with palpitating hearts because if the enemy were to discover them now, no one in Jing Jun's team will survive.

The lanterns on top of the city walls were dimmed by the heavy rain.

Just as they were nervously waiting, the city gates facing the west opened and the drawbridge was lowered.

Xiang and Teng were ecstatic as they gave the order and the whole army swarmed out. The thundering hooves of 20,000 warhorses shattered the sweet dreams of the city guards in Zhongmou, but everything is too late by now.

Wu Guo and Zhou Liang's armies launched a simultaneous attack on the two Zhao army camps outside the city.

Battle cries and screams shook the earth inside and outside



the city.

Although the thunderstorm has stopped, the battle has become even fiercer.

The army charged into the city, scaring the people into shutting their doors tight and half of the city guards removing their armors and abandoning their posts as they hid in residential houses to preserve their lives. The rest opened up the city gates and ran for their lives.

They've totally lost their will to retaliate.

By dawn, this most important and strategic city for the Kingdom of Zhao in the north has fallen into Xiang Shaolong's hands.

For the next 10 days, Zhao Da, leading more than 10,000 foot soldiers gradually arrived, bringing with them a large number of siege machinery, supplies and food. They also established the supply route from Xuanshi City to here.

Xiang Shaolong gave strict orders not to harass the civilians and to treat the surrendered soldiers with courtesy, using the approach of assuring the civilians.

Teng Yi set up base camps outside the city, started on building up defenses and cut off the official roads that connect between Zhao and Wei, making it look as if they are preparing for a massive attack on the Zhao Capital, Handan.

A month later, the Zhaos came twice to attack but were fought off on both attempts.

The Weis were on the alert. Their forces were on strict patrol along the border but as the Qin army has control of a sturdy city, the Weis only kept a close monitor.

No one dares to harbor any disparaging thoughts towards this famous Qin general, Xiang Shaolong.

On this day, Wu Ji came from Changzi city to see Xiang Shaolong and brought with him important news. According to the reports from their spies in Handan, Guo Kai is indeed petrified and trying to persuade the Zhao King and Dowager to summon Li Mu back to protect the palace in the capital.

But after the King of Zhao gave the orders, Li Mu actually rejected them.

Xiang and Teng were secretly in awe, knowing that Li Mu has seen through their ploy.

After some discussion, the two of them decided to launch a massive attack at Fanwu.

Once all arrangements were made, Xiang Shaolong activated the 80,000 strong army ten days later and traveled up to Fanwu via the official roads. They set up camp and formations outside the city walls of the Zhaos and launched attacks on the city walls day and night. The Zhaos came out of the city to attack the camp a few times but each time the Qin army was able to find out about the attacks first and defeat them utterly.

After attacking for 18 days, they finally broke down a section of the city wall but they were fought off by the enemy. Both

sides suffered heavy casualties.

But Xiang Shaolong and the rest know that their mission is accomplished for this time they need not worry that the King of Zhao won't summon Li Mu back to guard Fanwu. The truth is, with their current numbers, they do not have the capability to attack Handan at all.

The Zhaos only took one day to repair the wall.

Xiang Shaolong retreated his soldiers and did not attack so as to let their warriors have a chance to catch their breath. The dead were cremated on the spot while the injured soldiers were sent back to Zhongmou.

By this time, Xiang Shaolong is already numb to all the deaths on the battlefield, otherwise he'll never be able to become the Grand Commander of this Qin army.

Xiao Pan is right. There is no place for compassion on the battlefield.

Everyone is just a pawn on the chessboard, it's common to eat others or be eaten.

But the things that are within his control, he has already done them. For example caring for his subordinates, treating surrendered troops and civilians kindly etc. He wonders if the Zhaos are petrified of all the fights and they've stopped coming out of the city to retaliate and the two armies fell into a stalemate.

Huan Qi followed Xiang Shaolong's instructions and put on a huge act about sending in reinforcements constantly to

increase the Zhao people's sense of fear.

As they entered the second month of summer, Li Mu finally succumbed to the King of Zhao's orders and returned to Handan.

Xiang Shaolong immediately gave orders to fortify their defenses and get ready to deal with Li Mu's retaliation.

The thing that he had most wanted to avoid is finally right in front of his eyes.

On this day, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun were doing the routine patrolling along the five miles long stockade when Jing Jun said with a smile, "Even if Li Mu has three heads and six arms, he'll find it difficult to take down our camp. At the most, it'll be a draw." Teng Yi asked, "Are there any movement on the Wei side?"

Jing Jun replied, "Wu Guo is taking care of the Weis, but if we have not taken down Zhongmou, we would have been fought off long ago."

That night, Xiang Shaolong had a nightmare. He dreamt that Li Mu came to attack the camp and everywhere within the camp, is filled with his famous cavalry and all the tents were burning at the same time. Xiang Shaolong rushed out of the tent and wanted to call out for Teng Yi and Jing Jun but no sound came out. He wanted to pull out his blade but his Hundred Battles Blade was missing and he woke up in shock. Only to realize that the sky is still dark but he was drenched in cold sweat and panting hard.

Xiang Shaolong had an intense thought of his beloved wives, maids and child at home and had the urge to cast everything aside and return to Xianyang immediately.

Once his nerves were settled, he wrapped a cloak around him and walked out the tent.

The personal guards who were on night duty hurriedly followed after him.

His commander's tent is situated at a higher ground. As he looked around, he saw that beneath the stars, there were tiny dots of firelight that seems to stretch endlessly towards the horizon.

The city that belonged to the Zhaos five miles away was fully lighted and looked utterly impressive.

Zhou Liang's expression changed immediately as he focused on Eagle King's actions.

Xiang Shaolong felt that something is greatly amiss and looked over as well.

Eagle King kept flying in circles under the bright moonlight, its flight pattern strange and indecipherable.

Zhou Liang exclaimed in alarm, "That is impossible. It seems that there's a huge troop of our enemy rushing here from the left at a very fast speed."

In an instant, Xiang Shaolong understood what is happening. Li Mu's cavalry is coming.

Maybe their horses have their hooves covered in cloths so

there wasn't any sound at all.

This famous general who indeed lives up to his reputation has already deduced Xiang Shaolong's strategy long ago.

Although he was forced to give up Tunliu, he is unwilling to let them off. He has been staying put for the last two months to make Xiang Shaolong and the rest mistakenly think that he is stationed at Handan. In fact, he has been here long ago and have set up an ambush, just waiting for the moment of their retreat.

Xiang Shaolong is now following the fatal footsteps of Cheng Qiao and Du Bi. The only advantage he has is that because of Eagle King, he is one step ahead in fining out the enemy's approach.

If he were to escape immediately, the result will be not much different from Cheng Qiao's army's defeat. This means to say that before the whole army can arrive at Zhongmou, they would have been eliminated by Li Mu.

If he faces the battle head on, then at least Jing Jun and Teng Yi can reach Zhongmou safely.

Xiang Shaolong hesitated no further and gave orders for the army to retreat to the dense forest towards the right and do their best to block the enemy.

Before they could even complete their formation, tens of thousands of Zhao soldiers charged out towards the official path from the left of the dense forest, charging towards them.

Arrows flew towards their enemies like locusts. The enemy's cavalry fell down row by row but before they could notch the second arrow, suddenly the enemy is right in front of them.

Xiang Shaolong roared his orders as he pulled out Hundred Battles Blade and led his men in the charge.

In a short moment, the whole 10 miles stretch of the official path is filled with battle cries and screams.

Just as the 20,000 Qin soldiers were fending off the enemy, there was a sudden chaos near the Zhao border. Another group of enemy seemed to charge out of nowhere and cut off Xiang Shaolong's reinforcements into two parts.

Xiang Shaolong, with Zhou Liang and 2,000 personal guards fought off the enemy's wave after wave of attacks with their lives.

Crackling sounds were suddenly heard from the woods behind them as the fire burned, cutting off the Qin army's retreat route to the west. Xiang Shaolong knows that it's unavoidable, so he put aside everything else and cut down 10 odd enemy soldiers and killed his way right into the depths of the enemy's formation.

*[Continue to Book 5]*

## ABOUT AUTHOR

**Huang Zuqiang** (traditional Chinese, 黃祖強; born 1952), better known by his pen name **Huang Yi** (traditional Chinese, 黃易), is a Hong Kong writer of Wuxia and science fiction novels. He graduated from the Department of Fine Arts of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and once worked as the Assistant Chairperson of Hong Kong Museum of Art.



In the 1990s, after the golden age of Wuxia literature, Wuxia literature was increasingly under attack by the general public and was losing its previous aura. However, the emergence of Huang Yi infused new life into the Wuxia genre.

From *Lethal Weapons of Love and Passion* (Chinese, 覆雨翻雲) to *A Step Into The Past* (Chinese, 尋秦記) and to the now popular *Twin of Brothers* (Chinese, 大唐雙龍傳), Huang Yi has combined science fiction with traditional Chinese culture (metaphysics, philosophy, etc) to create a new style of work. Currently, his popularity has resulted in some people describing this phenomenon as flurry of Huang sweeping through China.

Upon conclusion of his longest novel, *Da Tang Shuang Long Zhuan* (*Twins of Brothers*), Huang Yi has commented that he would like to follow in the footsteps of Louis Cha and to revise and improve his released novels.

Source,  
Wikipedia.org



# LIST OF AUTHOR'S NOVELS

(This list is based on a list found at *shuku.net* dated **15 March 2010**)

NO	TITLE	PUBLISHER (YEAR)	REMARKS
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## SERIES:

### • YI XIA

- |   |  |                      |  |
|---|--|----------------------|--|
| 1 | 大唐双龙记 (Da Tang Shuang Long Ji)<br>Twin of Brothers         |                      |  |
| 2 | 寻秦记 (Xun Qin Ji)<br>A Step Into The Past                   | Wong Yi Books (2001) |  |
| 3 | 大剑师传奇 (Da Jian Shi Chuan Qi)                               |                      |  |
| 4 | 星际浪子 (Xing Ji Lang Zi)<br>Wanderer of the Cosmos           |                      |  |
| 5 | 荆楚争雄记 (Jing Chu Zheng Xiong Ji)                            |                      |  |
| 6 | 覆雨翻云 (Fu Yu Fan Yun)<br>Lethal Weapons of Love and Passion |                      |  |

### • LING DU YU

- |    |                          |  |  |
|----|--------------------------|--|--|
| 7  | 月魔 (Yue Mo)              |  |  |
| 8  | 上帝之谜 (Shang Di Zhi Mi)   |  |  |
| 9  | 兽性回归 (Shou Xing Hui Gui) |  |  |
| 10 | 诸神之战 (Zhu Shen Zhi Zhan) |  |  |
| 11 | 光神 (Guang Shen)          |  |  |
| 12 | 圣女 (Sheng Ru)            |  |  |
| 13 | 湖祭 (Hu Ji)               |  |  |
| 14 | 尔国临格 (Er Guo Lin Ge)     |  |  |
| 15 | 浮沉之主 (Fu Chen Zhi Zhu)   |  |  |

### • PO SUI XU KONG

16 破碎虚空 (Po Sui Xu Kong)

• XUAN HUAN

17 灵琴杀手 (Ling Qin Sha Shou)

18 超脑 (Chao Nao)

19 超级战士 (Chao Ji Zhan Shi)

20 时空浪族 (Shi Kong Lang Zu)

21 文明之秘 (Wen Ming Zhi Mi)

22 域外天魔 (Yu Wai Tian Mo)

23 幽灵船 (You Ling Chuan)

24 龙神 (Long Shen)

**NON SERIES:**

25 情约 (Qing Yao)

26 迷失的 (Mi Shi Di)

27 异灵 (Yi Ling)

28 魔女殿 ( Mo Nu Dian)

29 同归于尽 (Tong Gui Yu Jin)

30 乐王 (Yue Wang)

31 创世纪 (Chuang Shi Ji)

32 异能警察 (Yin Eng Jing Cha)

33 换天 (Huan Tian)

34 蝶梦 (Die Meng)

35 最后战士 (Zui Hou Zhan Shi)

36 故乡 (Gu Xiang)

37 惊世大预言 (Jing Shi Da Yu Yan)

38 乌金血剑 (Wu Jin Xue Jian)

39 天子传奇 (Tian Zi Chuan Qi)

40 寻鼎记 (Xun Ding Ji)

- 41 边荒传说 (Bian Huang Chuan Shuo)  
Wasteland Legend